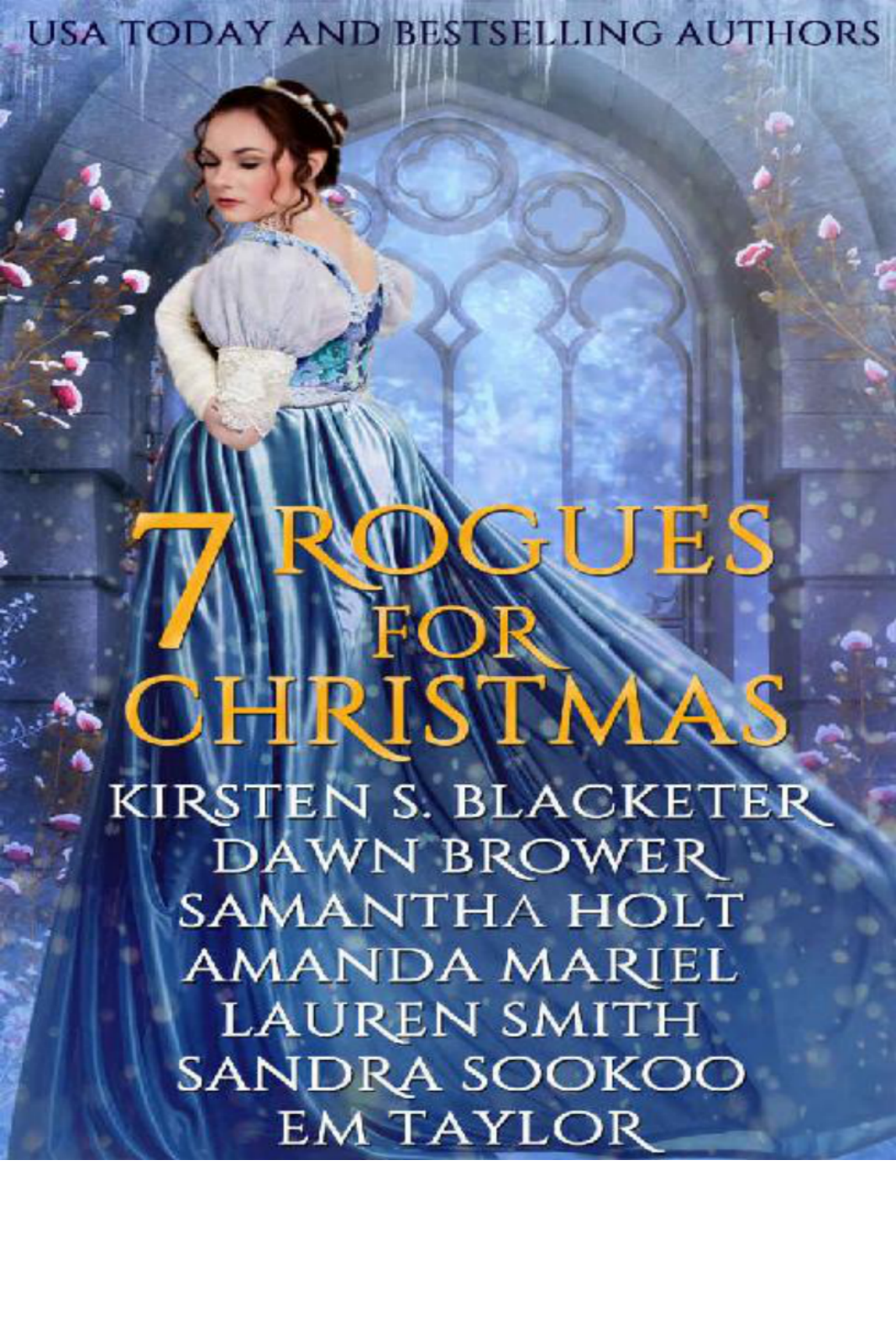


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7 ROGUES FOR CHRISTMAS

KIRSTEN S. BLACKETER
DAWN BROWER
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AMANDA MARIEL
LAUREN SMITH
SANDRA SOOKOO
EM TAYLOR

7 Rogue's For Christmas

Kirsten S Blacketer

Dawn Brower

Samantha Holt

Amanda Mariel

Lauren Smith

Sandra Sookoo

Em Taylor

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Jewel of Winter

Kirsten S. Blacketer

Jewel of Winter

Book 1 in the Thieves of Winter Trilogy

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Published by BlackShip

Cover Photo: www.hotdamnstock.com

Cover Design: Samantha Holt

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First Electronic Print, April 2015

Created with Vellum



*To the BlackShip Fangirls who share my fascination and fandom obsession.
Deadra and Samantha for helping me polish my prose.
Also to Eisuke Ichinomiya from Kissed by the Baddest Bidder, my first
Otome love and the inspiration for Edmund.*

Chapter 1

The howl of the wind outside made Jess shiver. "It's going to be another cold night. You might want to have Andrew check the stables once more." She turned to her sister standing behind the bar cleaning glasses and cutlery.

"The storm's keeping everyone from traveling. 'Tis a shame, being Christmas and all." Judith added, nodding to the empty common room tables. "Not a single guest."

"Well, that's a fine kettle of fish right there. I'm no one now." The old man at the end of the bar chuckled into his mug.

"Bart, you're more family to us than you are a patron. We enjoy your company, especially on nights such as these." Jess grinned at him when he tipped his glass in salute. She wiped down the tables, humming to herself when the door swung open with a thud. A cool burst of wind caught her skirts, and she shivered as the cold sank its teeth into her bare flesh.

A man stood in the doorway, his broad stature filling most of the frame, his narrow gaze shadowed by his wavy, dark hair. He stepped into the tavern followed by two other men. The scruffy one shut the door behind them. She hurried forward, grateful for the guests and the coin.

"Welcome to the Hart and Hare, my lords." As she approached the handsome trio, the leader stopped and took her measure, his cool grey gaze drifting over her. His expression remained passive and unreadable although the expensive cut of his clothes spoke of his wealth. She shivered again, but not from the cold this time. He surveyed the room and nodded.

"Not what I had in mind..." His words drifted off as he turned to his companions.

The scruffy one shrugged. "I've seen worse."

The third man stood silent, his eyes narrow and searching, like a hawk hunting for his prey.

Jess swallowed the prideful retort that caught in her throat. Her establishment was far from a dive. She pushed past the hurtful comment and smiled at her guests. Charm the coin out of them, Jess. "How may I be of service?"

"We require lodging and a hearty meal." The first man glanced around the room once more, then his sights rested on her.

"Please have a seat anywhere—" She began to speak when the leader cut her off.

"We require a private room."

Jess ground her teeth but smiled none-the-less. *Arrogant curmudgeons, the room is bloody empty!* She sighed and nodded. "This way, my lords." Jess led them to a small parlor at the back of the common room. A fire burned in the hearth. She added another log to it and turned to the men.

The stoic man sat facing the door, his back against the wall, while the scruffy one plopped into a chair by the fire.

"I'll take an ale and a whisky," he said propping his feet onto an unoccupied chair. He withdrew a case from his pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

She turned her attention to the leader, who stood next to the door, his eyes dark and focused on her as she straightened her apron. "Allow me to see to your supper then." Jess bowed slightly. As she passed through the door, the leader caught her wrist. Her gaze snapped to his. *How dare you...*

"Bring the bottle," he murmured and then released her.

Her body trembled with rage at their barely concealed contempt for her and her establishment. She scowled as she made her way toward the kitchen. How dare they mock her and everything she'd worked so hard for? This wasn't London—hell, it was barely a spot on the map—but her late husband had invested his life into this inn. Died trying to protect it, stupid bastard. She mumbled under her breath as she ladled the stew into bowls and sliced a loaf of fresh bread.

"Come into my inn acting all high and mighty..." She tucked the bread into a basket and covered it with a cloth. Arranging the food on the tray, Jess sighed. They were well-dressed in tailored suits. They were gentlemen that was for sure. But what were three gentlemen doing on the road this far north of London at this hour of the night?

Jess picked up the tray and carried it to the men waiting in the parlor. She set the tray down, arranged the food on the table, and tucked the tray beneath her arm as she retreated to the bar for their drinks. None of them spoke as she worked, but she felt their silent observation.

Judith leaned close to her as Jess poured the ale and set the mugs on the tray. "What a handsome trio." Her sister grinned when she

scoffed.

"Those men may have faces to tempt a woman to sin, but their hearts are black as the soot in that hearth." Her voice dropped low as she spied the leader glancing toward them from the doorway. "They've not said a sincere or polite word since they've arrived. What would possess someone to travel in this weather?"

The back door slammed as Andrew came in. He shook the snow from his coat and took off his cap. "The horses are tended, ma'am. Even took care of the toffs' carriage." He grinned and held up a coin.

"At least we know they can pay," Jess grumbled to herself. "Go get some stew in the kitchen and warm yourself. You did well, Andrew." Offering the lad a proud smile, she turned her attention back to the drinks and placed a bottle of whisky on the tray along with three small glasses next to the ale.

"Pray I don't kill them," she whispered to her sister as she headed into the lion's den. Her practiced movements steadied her trembling hands. If the man touched her again, she'd gut him. Handsome or not, his manners proved severely lacking. She laid the drinks on the table and stepped back, awaiting their directions.

"I'm starving," the scruffy one said as he abandoned the stew for the mug of ale.

"That will be all," the leader spoke as he joined the other two at the table. "I will summon you if your services are required. Do not disturb us." He turned his back to her.

"As you wish, my lords." Jess exited and closed the door behind her. Taking a moment to inhale and exhale deeply, she forced herself to remember the coin they would provide for her inn's services. "Bloody ungrateful sods."

Not another soul entered the inn after that. An hour later, Judith worked in the kitchens, cleaning for the night. Jess placed the mop back in the closet. She bolted the front door and popped into the kitchen.

"Are the rooms ready, Judith?"

"I changed the sheets before I came into the kitchen," her sister replied as she finished drying the pot in her hand.

"I'll check on our guests and then I'm off to bed."

"Good night, sister. Don't let one of those handsome devils charm his way into your bed." Judith winked.

"I would rather chew my own arm off than lie with one of those men." Jess waved her hand at her sister's ridiculous statement. She crept closer to the room when the sound of raised voices reached her ears.

"Well, I don't give a damn how it gets there. Once the earl's men discover the theft, it's only a matter of time before—"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Monty. No one knows our involvement in any of this. Besides the job is nearly done."

Jess pressed her ear against the door and strained to hear the conversation.

"Why did you pick this god-forsaken place for the rendezvous anyway? You normally have such class."

An unladylike snort escaped her before she could stop it. The door swung open, and Jess stumbled through the doorway. She caught herself before she tumbled to the ground and staggered to right herself. "My apologies, my lords. I came to see if there was anything else I could do for you this evening."

The silent one glared down at her as he closed the door.

"Well, well," the leader said as he stood and approached her. He clasped his hands behind his back.

Jess swallowed and backed up against the wall. "I'm dreadfully sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I—"

"How much did you overhear?" he asked, his gaze sharp.

She studied his eyes; the blue-grey reflected the fire, betraying no emotion only cold calculation and confidence. Her throat constricted. *Are they going to kill me?* She pressed her hand to her throat. "Nothing," she whispered as he leaned closer.

The scent of whisky and tobacco clung to him. His breath brushed against her neck as she turned her head to the side, avoiding his scrutiny. "Liar."

Her heart raced as he leaned back and chuckled. Jess' face burned as embarrassment and anger assailed her. The urge to lash out struck, but she refrained. "I promise to forget what I heard and leave you in peace. Please...let me go."

"What do you think? Shall we let her go now that she knows our little secret?" A cruel smile played on the corners of his lips. The first true emotion he displayed, and it terrified her.

"What a pain in the arse," the scruffy one said as he lit another cigarette. "I shouldn't have got involved this time." He exhaled a plume of white smoke.

The silent one shrugged. Then he surprised her by opening his mouth. "You're in charge of this circus. You take care of her."

Without shifting his attention from her, he held out his hand behind him. "Give me those irons, Monty."

The scruffy man reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a pair of irons; the kind Scotland Yard used for criminals. She stared in disbelief as he dropped them into the leader's hand.

"Keep the key."

The man tucked the key back into his pocket and exhaled another puff of smoke. "Women ain't nothing but trouble."

"Show us to our rooms." The leader gripped her wrist, and she winced from the pressure of his fingers against her skin.

She jerked her hand, trying to free herself from his grip. "Let me go. I'm not going to run."

His grip tightened, and she whimpered involuntarily.

"Not so tight!" she chastised him. The pressure on her wrist lightened a bit, but he refused to release her.

"Let's go." He tugged on her arm as they walked together toward the second floor where their rooms waited.

"These three," she said, pointing to the doors. "Your rooms." The scruffy one took the room on the right and the silent one took the room on the left, leaving Jess and the leader in the hallway staring at the door with a red flower on it.

"Let me go now." She stared at him. "I promise not to say a word."

He opened the door and shoved her inside. Jess stumbled and collapsed onto the bed from the sudden movement. Flustered, she righted herself just as he closed the door and slid the bolt home. He turned to face her.

"You're staying here tonight." He took a half step closer.

"The hell I am!" she snapped, then clamped her hand over her mouth. She watched the flicker of amusement pass from his eyes to the curl of his lips. Then he smiled, baring his white even teeth in a sinful, devastating grin.

"You don't have much of a choice. I'm the one giving orders here, and you can't seem to stay out of other people's business." He took two steps closer.

She trembled as they stood toe to toe. He looked down at her. She met his gaze defiantly and thrust her chin out. "You can't keep me here against my will."

"I can, and I will." He reached out and grasped her chin.

She jerked it from his hand and pushed against his chest. "Out of my way." Pushing against him proved to be as useful as a shovel moving a mountain.

With a quick movement, he clasped the iron cuff around her left wrist and tightened it. "Until I say otherwise, you're mine."

Jess pulled at the cuff. "Get this damned thing off of me!"

He fastened the other part around his right wrist and locked it. "Don't bother killing me for the key. Monty has it." His grin made her anger bubble.

"How dare you come into my establishment, berate and demand, and then incarcerate me!" She reached for the door, and he pulled her back. Jess slammed into his chest and straightened quickly. The feel of him against her reminded her how long it'd been since she'd held a man. Her marriage had been short, but it hadn't left her

inexperienced. Her husband's sudden death had left her with unattended desires. Jess licked her lips and stood beside him, the heat from his body making her aware of how close they stood.

He sat down on the bed, pulling her down beside him. "Lie down." He lay on the bed, and she scrambled to lay down, careful to keep two feet between them.

She stared at the ceiling, anger and disbelief coursing through her veins. The heat from his hand distracted her. *How could I have been so stupid? What is he going to do with me?* Her sister believed her to be in bed asleep. Jess sighed.

"Do you have a name?"

His question startled her. "Jessamine, but everyone calls me Jess."

He grunted in response.

"What am I supposed to call you?"

"My lord."

If she could have rolled away from him, she would have.
The pompous arse.

Chapter 2

As he lay there, Edmund contemplated the woman beside him.

He'd chosen this inn because of its remote location and proximity to London. Never had he imagined a slip of a woman complicating his otherwise flawless plan. It proved difficult enough taking on a job with two partners in tow, but since she'd stumbled onto their discussion, he had no choice but to involve her.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Her eyes were closed. His gaze raked over her dirty blonde hair coming loose from the chignon, and he wondered if it was as soft as it looked. He refocused his attention on the ceiling. The soft, tantalizing scent of her made the long suppressed hunger resurface. It'd been too long since he'd been with a woman. He chewed on the inside of his cheek.

There were too many variables in play, too much at stake. He couldn't take the chance of bringing someone into his inner circle, especially a woman, and not even for a short period of time. Monty had recommended a discreet brothel, suggesting it may help him relax if he enjoyed some female companionship. Edmund had been far from amused. He wasn't going to pay for sex. He ran his hand across his jaw.

The woman who occupied the space beside him, Jess, had now complicated his entire scheme. He hated involving any outsiders in his dealings, but there was nothing to be done about her. She'd approached at the wrong time. Her heavy sigh shook him from his thoughts.

"Are you going to kill me?"

He smothered his laughter before it escaped his lips. "Do you want me to?" he countered, his voice steady and deceptively calm.

"Why are you holding me prisoner and what happens in the morning when I must return to my duties?" She propped herself up on her elbow and stared at him. He felt her gaze on his profile. "My sister will be worried if I don't return to help her. Are you going

to kidnap me?"

He turned to look at her at the almost fearful tone of her last question as if leaving this hovel were worse than death. "You prefer death to my stealing you away from here?"

Jess glanced down at the irons binding them and shrugged. Her words grew bold as she met his gaze. "My preference would be for you to release me and leave my inn."

"I have no intention of doing any of those things, so you might as well sleep."

She flopped onto her back, her hair finally falling free from its knot. After a few moments of silence, Jess turned toward him again. "What did you steal?"

"I thought you said you didn't hear anything?" He faced her again, struggling to keep his expression impassive. The minx was trying his patience and stirring his curiosity. Neither of those things boded well for his mission.

Her face flushed a pretty shade of pink. "I...well, never mind." She lay down again and draped her right arm across her face.

"Curiosity can be a dangerous thing." The words were a reminder to himself as much as a reprimand directed at her. "Go to sleep."

She mumbled something under her breath and jerked the hand cuffed to him. "I can't sleep like this. It's uncomfortable."

"How do you normally sleep?"

"Alone."

He grinned at her snarky comment. "I meant do you sleep on your side, your back, or your stomach?"

"Why do you care?" Her voice echoed with sarcasm in the small room. After a moment, she conceded. "My right side."

Before she could react, he grasped her waist and rolled her over the top of him, tucking her body against his left side. Their cuffed hands lay on his chest as she looked down at him with wide blue eyes. They sparkled very much like the prize he had hidden in his pocket. He scowled as his body stiffened at her touch. "Lie down." Edmund wrapped his arm around her shoulders as she hesitantly leaned her head on his shoulder. Her hand rested over his heart. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Her scent consumed him as her curves nestled against his body. Every breath she took sent a shock of awareness ricocheting through him. She arched against him as she tried to find a comfortable position.

"Be still," he snapped.

Jess tensed beneath his hand. He ran a fingertip across her shoulder, back and forth, in an effort to soothe her. Honestly, he hadn't meant to startle her, but it'd been far too long since he'd had a

woman in his arms. Any more movement on her part and he would have taken advantage of the situation and the soft woman chained to him. What the hell had he been thinking putting irons on her?

The thought of Monty or Simon watching her triggered a pang of jealousy. Her smiling face and sweet greeting when they'd arrived at the inn struck him. He wasn't here for a dalliance; they had a mission to complete. But when she'd been caught red-handed outside the door, he'd had no choice but to take her captive. A complication with her gold spun hair and sapphire eyes.

Her steady breaths brought him back to the moment. He glanced down at the woman now sleeping in his embrace. Edmund covered her hand with his and allowed himself a small smile.

The wind howled outside. Hopefully the storm would let up by the next evening, ensuring a safe return to London. A pang of emotion struck him at the thought of leaving the feisty young innkeeper. It didn't matter. They would make the exchange and return to London before their absences were noted. He pushed thoughts of her away and fell asleep to the sound of the winter storm raging outside.

Chapter 3

When she opened her eyes, the sight that greeted her made her heart pound. Jess still lay cradled in the man's embrace. She frowned. How could she feel this way in the arms of a stranger who'd shackled her to himself and forced her to share his bed? He hadn't touched her inappropriately, so that must mean he had some semblance of decorum. Even though he spoke like a gentleman and dressed like one did not mean he was truly a gentleman.

She caught a glimpse of his hand atop hers, resting on his chest. Gentleman or not, she missed the simple comfort of being held. Jess pushed the longing aside and moved her hand. He stirred at the movement but did not wake. The sharp angles of his face seemed softer in the morning light, even more so while he slept. She sighed as a tender emotion threatened to overtake her heart. *Why waste such intimate thoughts on an overbearing stranger, a thief using me as insurance?*

"Wake up," she said poking him in the chest. "I said, wake up!" Jess jabbed her finger deeper, and he snatched her hand in his.

"There are much more pleasant ways to wake someone." He smoothed his fingers over her palm. "A gentle word, a soft touch, a tender kiss..."

"You deserve none of those." Jess repressed the burning need his touch ignited.

"Your husband has been remiss in his duties. Perhaps he should've taken time to train you better."

His words startled her. "My husband is dead."

"I know."

Her gaze snapped to his. "How did you know?"

He raised a brow. The sharp scrutiny of his gaze made her shift uncomfortably. "I make it a point to research the places I visit before I arrive."

"I could have been an innocent woman...a maid employed by the

owner of the inn. How would you have known?"

"Had you been an innocent, you'd have been trembling and terrified when I brought you to this room." He gripped her wrist. "But your body's reaction to my touch told me all I needed to know about the status of your...innocence."

She pulled her hand away. "Release me."

He opened his mouth to reply when a knock gave him pause. "Come along." He sat up, pulling her with him. When he'd set them both on their feet, he unlocked the door and swung it open. "Yes?"

The man's silent friend stood there, a scowl on his face. *Did the man ever smile?* The scruffy one stood behind him, a cigarette dangling from his lips. They both looked irritated.

"A messenger sent word Terence and McGruder are on their way. They've been tipped off to our direction. We may have to change plans, they're not far now." The scruffy one spoke, blowing smoke in an agitated huff. "All that work, what a pain in the arse."

"True, but they don't know who they're after. They have a scent trail, nothing more." The man bound to her stroked his chin with his free hand. "Both of you, take the carriage and go north then double back. I'll remain here and give these two hounds a new fox to chase."

The two accomplices nodded and turned to leave.

"Monty, the key please?" the man asked, holding his hand out.

"Right." The scruffy one took the key from his vest pocket and dropped it in his hand.

"I'll meet you boys back here before supper." He nodded to them as they left and then turned his attention to her.

Jess swallowed as he unsnapped the metal brace from her wrist. "Thank you."

"You're involved now." He pocketed the irons and key. Taking her chin in his hand, he leaned close. "If you betray me or my comrades, it will implicate you as well. Then I will take my payment from you in any way I deem satisfying." He forced her to meet his intense stare. Her heart ceased beating as his breath brushed her lips. "Behave and I shall leave you in peace."

She nodded, afraid her voice would fail if she tried to speak. He was not a man to be crossed, of that she was certain. He released her, and Jess stumbled back.

Closing the door again, he turned to her. "Lift your skirts."

Jess backed away from him, shaking her head so hard her hair tumbled over her shoulders.

He approached her as a wolf would stalk a rabbit. "I gave you an order."

When she slammed into the wall next to the fireplace, he stopped. She stared past him, her eyes darting around the room looking for a

weapon of some kind. He grasped her hands and pinned them to the wall beside her head.

"Do I terrify you?" His soft voice made her still beneath him. "If you obey me, I promise no harm will come to you." He released her hands but did not step away. "Lift your skirts, or I will do it for you."

Jess inched her skirt up until her drawers-covered thighs were exposed to his view. He knelt before her trailing his hand across the linen. The heat from his hand burned as she closed her eyes. *What is he going to do to me?* She bit her lip, anticipating his touch. Her body's reaction should have been fear and loathing, but the desire that pulsed inside of her shook her to the core.

He pressed something to her thigh, and she felt the distinct tightening as he tied it there. Her eyes flew open. Glancing down, she watched him tie a small sack to her thigh, just above her garter. His fingers brushed the crease where her thigh met her torso, and she suppressed a whimper. Her body betrayed her again. She cursed it.

Making sure the sack was secure with a tug, he glanced up at her as his hands slid down her legs and fell away. "Put your skirt down."

Jess dropped her skirts and pushed past him. "I have work to do." She fumed at the emotions raging within her. *He shouldn't arouse me. He's threatened and intimidated me.* The inn called...her work, her life. She had a job to do. Damn him.

As she reached for the door, he snatched her arm and pulled her back to him. "Today, I am your husband. Speak only when you're spoken to." His grey eyes hardened as he spoke. "Understand?"

"My sister will never allow this charade." She pulled her arm from his grasp, and he relinquished it without hesitation.

"Convince her. Until the sun sets, you are my wife." The expression on his face remained impassive, but there was no ignoring the intensity in his voice. "Do you have clothing for me to change into? No one will believe I'm your husband dressed like this."

She perched her hands on her hips and narrowed her gaze at him. Insensitive, cold, and irritating...but he was right. No one would believe they were married with him dressed in his finely tailored suit. "I have some clothes in my room that used to belong to my husband. You can wear those."

He stretched his arm out and opened the door, motioning for her to proceed. The two of them walked in silence to a room in the back of the inn beside the kitchen. A soft clang of metal echoed from the kitchen as they slipped into her chambers. She closed the door behind them. Quickly locating the garments, she tossed them on her bed.

"Here. I'll leave you alone to change. I need to talk to my sister about your...request." She struggled to keep a civil tone.

His lips thinned as he pressed them together, regarding her in

silence. "Say nothing of what you know. I needn't remind you of the consequences."

With a stiff nod, Jess left the room and entered the kitchen. "Morning, Judy." She forced a cheerful tone and smiled.

"Jess, you weren't in your room when I went to wake you." She kneaded the dough on the counter and rounded it into a loaf. "Did one of those gentleman take you to his room last night?"

The heat rose in her cheeks, giving her sister the wrong impression, but she played off of it to keep her word to the brute now changing in her room. The thought of him naked made the blush deepen, and she fanned herself with her hand. "You could say that."

"Jessamine Annabell Watson. Tell me everything!" Judy dropped the loaf onto the table and dusted her hands on her apron as she rushed over to her sister.

Jess put her hands up. "I can't give you details now. Please, just listen to me." She took her by the shoulders and tucked a flour stained lock of hair behind Judy's ear before smiling at her. "He's going to be with me today, all day, by my side...as my husband."

"You're getting *married*?" Judy's jaw dropped.

"No...no...he's just pretending to be my husband today. Please, there are some guests passing through...well, I can't explain it all right now, but I need you to trust me. Can you do that? Just this once, I swear I will make it up to you." She shook her sister. "Judy, I need you to do this for me, please, I'm begging you."

A soft sigh fell from Judy's pouted lips. "Fine, but I want all the details tonight. Every. Last. One."

"Thank you." Jess hugged her tight. "I promise I'll make it up to you. Now, I have another request."

Judy narrowed her eyes. "Sure," she said with an exasperated sigh. "What is it?"

"I need you to stay in the kitchen today."

"All day?" Judy stared at her in disbelief. "But I...you...we have...ugh, fine. I'm keeping a tally of your debts, you know. One of these days I'll call them in and you'll..." Judy's voice trailed off as the door squeaked behind her.

"Am I interrupting anything?" a familiar and irritating voice asked. If she hadn't been privy to his coldhearted threats and demands, she'd have melted into a puddle on the floor. His deep voice oozed confidence and...well, other things.

Jess turned to him. "No, everything is fine. This is my sister, Judy."

He reached out and took her sister's flour covered hand, pressing a kiss to the back of it. Jess' stared at him in amazement and watched his face transform when he smiled at Judy. "Tis a pleasure to meet you." He dropped her hand and flashed his grin at Jess.

She stumbled back and gripped the countertop behind her. Who was this man? There could be no way it was the same man she'd just spent the night with. What...who... She pressed her hands to her temple and shook her head. He winked at her. *Oh sweet merciful God in heaven.*

"Jess, you lucky devil." Judy giggled as she returned to her loaves of bread. "Well, charming, do you have a name?"

"Please, call me Edmund."

Jess had endured enough. She snatched him by the arm and dragged him into the common room. "We'll just be out here," she called to Judy as the door swung shut behind her. Spinning to face him, she saw the icy façade slip back into place. "Care to explain that little production?"

He shrugged. "I don't have to explain anything to you."

It took every ounce of willpower she possessed not to wrap her hands around his throat. She took several deep breaths before speaking again, meeting his gaze levelly. The last sin she wanted to add to her ever growing list was murder.

"Is that really your name?" she asked, turning away to wipe the bottles of liquor on the shelf.

"It is," he murmured behind her. "But I still require you to call me my lord when we're alone."

Jess glared at him over her shoulder. "You don't own me," she said, feeling braver now that they weren't within earshot of her sister. She jumped, nearly dropping the bottle of whisky as his hands enclosed her waist. His body pressed against her back as his grip tightened.

"Do not test my patience. Right now, you are in my possession. Do not forget that."

She tried to jerk from his grip, but he pulled her back and spun her to face him. She slapped him. The force of the blow left red marks on his cheek. He glared at her through the dark hair that had fallen across his forehead and gripped her wrist.

"Do that again and not even the mighty hand of God himself will be able to save you from me."

Her heart fluttered and stopped. The intensity of his gaze and the heat rolling off of him warned of his impending wrath. Jess opened her mouth to speak when the main door opened.

Edmund pulled her into his embrace and pressed his lips to her ear. "Remember your place." He released her gently and turned toward the guests with a warm smile on his lips. "Welcome, gentlemen, what can we do for you?"

Jess smoothed her skirt and watched him shift from one persona to the other with ease. She shook her head and turned back to the bottles. How could someone be so changeable at a whim?

"Good day." One of the men stepped closer and sat at the bar. His mustache hid his upper lip when he smiled.

"Have you had any guests in the last day?" The other joined him after glancing around the room. He looked rough with a scar along his clean shaven cheeks and sharp eyes.

"Only a few men traveling through, stopped for a meal last night and then went on their way." Jess interjected, keeping her tone firm, but they ignored her.

"These men—" the mustached man turned to Edmund and tapped his fingers on the bar "—did they happen to say which way they were headed?"

Jess watched the men carefully. She wiped down the last bottle and set it on the shelf. Her inn sat on a crossroad in a small village, a few hundred feet from the train station. Five miles to the north sat another village and beyond that the long road to Scotland. A left at the crossroad would take you to Coventry, and Wales if you traveled far enough. She assumed it was Edmund and his men they were after.

"The stable boy said they headed east after their rest last eve." Edmund shrugged as if the whole conversation mattered little to him. "Can I ask why you're looking for them?" The men glanced at each other and then back at Edmund.

"Thieves," the scarred man said simply as if it answered all the mysteries of the universe.

"Really?" Edmund leaned closer to the men, resting his arms on the bar. "Who did they steal from?"

"The Earl of Norwich. They had a masquerade ball last week and found their prized jewels had been stolen." The whiskered man leaned back and shrugged. "Had a witness say they overheard three men talking about a theft and saw the jewels with their own eyes."

"Sound like dangerous men, although they looked common enough when they stopped here last night. That is, if they're the same men you're after." Edmund picked up a bottle of whisky. "Care for a dram?" The men nodded, and he poured two drinks. "Jess, would you fetch some of your famous stew for these hungry gentlemen?" His pointed look told her to be quick about it.

With a nod, she disappeared into the kitchen. The brush of the bag tied to her thigh made her pause. Were the jewels inside the bag? She moved to the stove where a pot of stew simmered.

Judy glanced up from where she stood kneading another loaf of bread. "Are there guests, Jess?"

"Yes," she replied, turning to her sister. "Would you mind slicing some bread and getting some butter and jam as well?"

"Right away," Judy said with a grin. "He's a handsome man, Jess. I'm dying to know what's going on." Her pleading gaze made Jess sigh.

"I can't tell you now. Later, I promise." She waved her sister on as she knelt to collect bowls off the shelf. Her hand brushed against the bag beneath her skirts. With a hesitant glance over her shoulder, she slipped the bag free. Pulling it open, she gasped when the light caught the facets of the diamonds and sapphires contained within the bag.

"Everything okay?" Judy asked as she set the tray on the table.

"Yes, just got some dust in my eye." She grabbed the bowls and stood, tucking the bag in her skirt pocket. *I have to put it back. What will he do when he finds out I've removed it?* She swallowed hard. *I know his secret.* A grin crept across her face as an idea settled into her mind.

She grabbed the empty coal bucket. "Would you mind ladling the stew into the bowls? I must fetch some coal."

"Be quick. You don't want the meal to get cold," her sister called after her as she opened the door to the basement and stepped down into the chilled, dark room.

Moving quickly, even in the dark, Jess opened the bag and emptied the contents into her hand. She tucked the necklace into her pocket and carefully picked up a few small pieces of coal to match the size and weight of the jewels. Quickly, she cleaned her hands on her apron and retied the bag to her thigh. Jess filled the bucket and brought it up to the kitchen just in time to see Judy place the second bowl on the tray.

Jess quickly washed the soot and coal dust from her hands. Turning to her sister, she smiled. "How do I look?"

"You have black dust smeared on your nose." Judy wiped it off with a damp cloth and beamed at her. "There, fresh as a daisy."

"I highly doubt that. What I wouldn't give for a bath." Her heart fluttered at the deception she'd just engaged in and she sighed. She had to hide the necklace, but where?

"Where's the stew?" Edmund poked his head in the door and met her gaze.

"I'm bringing it out right now," she replied, picking up the tray and walking toward him. He held the door for her. She glanced up at him in surprise and saw a small smile playing on his lips. Edmund smiling stole her breath. With a shake of her head to clear the whimsy, she turned to the men waiting for their meal. After serving them, she turned to return the tray when Edmund grabbed her by the waist and pressed a kiss to her head.

"Thank you, love."

Jess' whole body stilled at his touch, her heart stopped, her breath ceased. His tender kiss shook her.

He tilted her head back and kissed the tip of her nose. "Would you bring me some too?" His grey eyes twinkled as she stared open-mouthed at him.

Snapping her mouth shut, she nodded. He released her, and she stumbled into the kitchen as if drunk. When she braced herself against the counter, her breath returned. Jess gasped and pushed past her gawking sister as she walked quickly to her room.

As she closed the door behind her, Jess began laughing. This entire charade proved too much. She remembered the necklace in her pocket. If he'd have found it...her head swam at the thought of his fury. She could easily replace it in the bag, and he would be none the wiser. But she couldn't. He didn't deserve it; he was a manipulative thief.

Finally deciding a path, she pulled the necklace from her pocket and moved to the far side of her bed. Jess knelt on the floor and pried up a loose floorboard beneath her bed. She pulled out a small bag with coins in it. After taking the coins out, she placed the jewels into it. Dropping the bag into the hole and securing the board again, Jess stood and removed her soot stained apron. When she had donned a fresh one, Jess returned to the kitchen. Her sister had a bowl of stew ready and waiting. She arched her brow in Judy's direction.

"I heard him." Judy blushed. "Take this out, don't keep him waiting."

Jess snorted. It seemed even her sister was smitten by the man with two faces. Shouldn't surprise her considering his occupation included the art of deception. She plastered a smile on her face as she took the small tray into the room where her husband sat with the two men and set the tray on the bar.

As the men chatted, the door opened, and a man in a tattered overcoat entered the inn.

"Welcome," she called out, ignoring the strong presence beside her. Edmund's hand rested on her hip.

"What can we do for you?" Edmund asked, his cheerful voice belying the tense grip he held on her.

"I'll take a pint." The man sat and slapped his hat down on the bar in exasperation.

"Certainly," Jess replied, pouring the ale for him. She set the glass down.

The man's gaze shot to the men at the end of the bar, then rested on Edmund. He took a healthy swallow and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Anyone headed to Gretna Green?"

The grip on her side never loosened. The mention of Gretna Green only increased the pressure of his hold on her. She glanced at the sharp profile of the man beside her. Edmund's jaw clenched even though he wore an easy smile.

"No, we're headed east. Thank you for the meal." The mustached gentleman laid his coin on the bar. "And the information."

"I hope you catch them," Jess called out as she waved.

Edmund's tightening grip made her turn, and he narrowed his eyes at her. She flashed him her most brilliant smile.

"Good day, ma'am, sir." The scarred man tipped his hat and then followed his companion out the front door.

Jess watched the smile on Edmund's lips disintegrate as the door closed. He turned to the man left at the bar who watched them with interest.

"Meet me in the stables once you've finished your beer." Edmund's sudden shift in demeanor made the man blink twice as his jaw hung open and the mug hovered a breath from his lips.

"Why?" the man asked with evident hesitation as he lowered his mug.

"Because I have the item you requested."

The man nodded and took another drink.

Edmund took Jess' hand and led her into the kitchen. Judy's wide eyes followed them as they passed through the room and entered her private chamber. He closed the door behind her and leaned against it.

"Give me the bag." He watched her, his arms folded across his chest.

Jess' heart took a shuddering leap at his words. He would know. He...oh God, it had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now what could she do? *Tell him the truth.* A tiny voice in her head screamed. She shook her head at the voice echoing in her mind.

He sighed. "Then I'll take it back myself."

Before she realized he'd taken her inner dialog as refusal, he had her by the wrists and pinned her against the wall. He pressed his weight into her and gripped both her wrists in one hand while the other pulled up her skirt. Edmund slipped the bag free, letting his fingertips trace the inside of her thigh.

She whimpered at the contact. Even through the linen of her drawers, his touch ignited a desire unlike anything she'd ever experienced. When she caught his expression, the desire dimmed to a smoldering ember.

He smirked down at her. "One touch and you're as limp as a rag doll in my arms." Edmund slipped the bag into his pocket and placed his hand on her waist.

Jess jerked against him, but his hands refused to relinquish their hold. "You have what you wanted. Now go." With every breath she took, his scent surrounded her. Masculine, tinted with whisky and cedar.

"Why would I do that?" His eyes twinkled with mischief.

"You have what you want. Leave me in peace."

He leaned closer, his hand sliding up her side, over the curve of

her breast, coming to rest on her neck. His thumb smoothed across her jaw.

Her lip trembled as she fought against her body's reaction to his touch. "Please."

"Please what?" he whispered, his breath caressing her skin as he drew closer.

She knew what was coming, but for the love of all things holy, she couldn't have stopped herself from taking what he offered. Jess closed the gap between their mouths and kissed him hard. He tasted like the whisky, cinnamon, and temptation.

He slipped his hand into her hair and grabbed a fistful, pulling her head back. When she gasped at his teeth against her neck, he released her, claiming her lips again, delving into her mouth, and teasing the hunger that had long been denied.

Jess clung to him, their breaths mingling as the passion grew. When he pulled away, her body swayed in protest. The mischief in his eyes had disappeared, replaced by something much more carnal. He shook his head and his expression shuttered instantly.

"Remember, if you speak to anyone, I will know." He released her and stepped back.

Jess leaned against the wall and nodded. It was all she could do. He'd robbed her of her wits, her words, and her morals.

His gaze skimmed down her body and then met hers once more. He turned and left the room as if the world hadn't just come to a stand-still at the kiss they'd shared. As the door closed, she collapsed onto the bed knowing he'd be back and fearing this time his actions would be far more punishing than his kiss. A fleeting thought crossed her mind...*run*. It wouldn't matter how far she ran, he would find her. *Saints above, I'll be dead by nightfall.*

Chapter 4

Edmund found the back door through the kitchen, ignoring the questioning look on the sister's face. He pushed past all pretense and opened the door, stepping out into the snow. The overcast sky lingered long after the snow stopped falling. He took a deep breath and let the crisp air burn as he attempted to purge the scent of Jess...the softness of her skin, the taste of her mouth, the way she arched against him. *Damn it!*

He raked a hand through his hair and walked through the ankle deep snow toward the stable. The cold breeze nipped at his skin through the thin shirt. The quicker this business was concluded, the faster he could return to London. This woman—he flinched at the memory of her in his arms—proved nothing more than a complication in an otherwise flawless plan. The kiss had surprised him, but he shoved the desire that clung to him deep into the darkest part of his soul. A pretty, tasty complication, to be sure, but there were plenty trifles to be had in London. A barmaid on this deserted strip of road could not possibly fulfill any desire of his.

As he opened the door, he spied the man from the bar lounging against a hay bale, twisting his cap in his hands. He put it on his head as Edmund approached him and tucked his hands into his pockets.

"Do you have my compensation?" Edmund asked, eyeing the man warily.

The slender man pulled a sealed letter from his pocket and held it out for Edmund to take. He snatched the letter and opened it, surveying the contents. Frustration and annoyance built up as he folded the letter and tapped it against his open palm.

"What is this?" Edmund scowled and the man backed up a few steps, glancing around for a means of escape.

"It...It's your payment for the jewels." The man's fearful stutter showed his ignorance.

"This was not what I agreed to." He tossed the letter at the

messenger's feet. The man picked it up and scuttled backward as Edmund approached with measured steps. "I shall not be tricked again. Take that letter back to your master with a message: 'The deal is off.' Now, get out of my sight."

"Yes, sir." The man squealed as he ran past Edmund and out the stable door.

Once he disappeared, Edmund leaned up against the door looking out over the fresh snow covering the field when he saw a carriage approaching from the north. He strode out to meet the coach as it rolled to a stop behind the inn. Monty stepped down from the coach, followed by Simon.

"Did you make the exchange?" Monty asked, crushing a cigarette beneath his boot.

"No." Edmund glanced between the men. "The letter contained nothing I didn't already know. The bargained information was withheld. Unless he decides to renegotiate for higher terms, he will never receive his bauble."

Monty lit another cigarette and shrugged his shoulders. "What a pain in the arse."

Simon nodded in agreement. "London?"

"Let me get my things. I'll meet you here in five minutes." Edmund pulled the bag from his pocket and cradled it in his hand. The bag felt different than it had earlier that day. He rolled the jewels inside and swore. Opening the drawstring, he peered inside the bag. Shiny, sparkling lumps of coal winked back at him.

"Something wrong?" Monty asked with a puff of smoke.

"Nothing," he growled closing the bag in his fist. He turned to them, their stares of curiosity turning to fear as they recognized his reaction. "Change of plans. I have unfinished business to attend."

The men nodded and stepped out of his path as he returned to the inn. He kicked open the door and saw Judy staring at him, her jaw agape.

"Where is your sister?" he demanded.

Judy pointed to the bedroom where he'd left Jess. Covering the space with quick strides, he jerked open the door and saw Jess lying on the bed, the blanket pulled over her head. The mound of fabric trembled as he stepped closer.

"You have pushed me too far," he said between clenched teeth. "I warned you of the consequences." Snatching the covers, he tossed them aside. She yelped as he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder, securely pinning her there. "Where are my jewels?"

"Go to hell," she screamed. His hand came down on her backside, and she writhed in protest. "Don't hit me!"

"Tell me where they are, woman." He swatted her arse again,

making sure the material was pulled tight across her bottom so she felt every sting.

"Never! Thief, liar, brute!"

He smacked her arse so hard she cried out. "I will give you one last opportunity to tell me."

"I'd rather rot in hell." Her voice echoed with determination even though he heard the thin thread of fear in her tone.

"Very well then." Edmund carried her through the kitchen and out into the yard where the carriage waited.

Simon and Monty watched with wide eyes as he opened the carriage door and tossed her onto the seat. He closed the door and turned to them. Her shouts from inside the carriage echoed as he spoke, punctuating his words.

"Monty, take the train north to get the information directly from the old man. Simon, stay here. Tear this inn apart. This wench has hidden the jewels somewhere, and they need to be found post haste." He glanced at the kitchen door where Judy stood, her brow creased in concern. "You're going to have to keep the sister quiet."

"Do you want me to—?"

Edmund raised his hand. "Don't do anything brash. Let's try to keep this as quiet as possible." He raked his hand through his hair. "Just find those jewels. Send a telegram when you find them."

Simon nodded as did Monty, and they both approached the inn. Edmund turned his attention back to the woman banging on his carriage windows.

"Let me out of here this instant!" The color of her cheeks had deepened to a lovely crimson.

He grinned and opened the door. Stepping into the coach, he tapped the roof and sat down. She bolted, reaching for the door handle, and he pulled her into his lap as the carriage lurched into motion.

"You can't do this! This is kidnapping. I swear on my husband's grave I will kill you if you don't release me right now!"

He pinned her flailing arms down as he tightened his grip on her. She fit perfectly across his lap, her hair now bushy and wild from her struggles. Jess wiggled, trying to escape him, but he only increased his hold on her.

"I warned you before," he whispered in her ear. She stilled, holding her breath. "You disobeyed and now..." He chuckled.

"Now what?" she whispered.

"Now you belong to me."

"Belong to you...I don't understand." She stared at him, her blue eyes bright with unshed tears.

"You stole something that belongs to me. Until I get it back, I'm

holding you as ransom."

"I stole something? What about you? Those jewels don't belong to you. Those men were searching for you today, weren't they?" She huffed, blowing a strand of hair from her face. "You are the thief, not I." She grumbled under her breath. "I should have told them."

"And you would have found yourself in a much worse situation than this, trust me."

"Trust you!" Jess scoffed. "I'd rather jump into the Thames."

Edmund grasped her chin in his hands and forced her to meet his gaze. Her flustered appearance enhanced her childlike innocence. He beat down the desire rearing its head deep inside him. *Damn it all.* The last thing he needed was more trouble, and yet he sat with a lapful of soft, sinful, succulent trouble staring at him.

"Let me get one thing straight. Until those jewels are once again in my possession, you will take their place." He brought her face closer. "When I ask you to do something, I expect immediate compliance. Do you understand?"

Jess nodded. "What will you do with me?" she whispered.

"I'm sure I can find a use for you, my pet." He released her chin and pulled her against him. "Just rest. We have a long journey to London."

She stiffened in his arms when he pressed her head against his chest. As the minutes ticked by, her body relaxed as the carriage swayed. "I've never seen London," Jess murmured as her eyes drifted closed.

Edmund leaned his head back as she relaxed against him, snuggling into his warmth. He could have easily laid her down on the seat across from him. God knew he needed the reprieve. Her scent captivated him, her soft curves pressed against him. He swore under his breath. What was he going to do with her? He had no use for another servant, let alone having to worry about her running off.

He stared out the window as the snow covered landscape passed by. His thoughts flitted back and forth between the jewels, the woman in his lap, and the men he trusted to get the job done.

The hours passed by quickly as he sat absorbed in his thoughts. The bustle of the city had woken Jess. She stared at him and her face flushed when she noticed how he still cradled her in his arms. The noise brought her attention to the window.

"May I?" she asked gesturing to the window. Her eyes lit up as she watched the commotion outside the carriage. As they wove through the city streets, he saw the emotions pass over her features one by one. Joy, confusion, hurt, anger, curiosity...they blended together seamlessly to showcase the woman inside. Jess turned to him as the carriage rolled to a stop.

"Where are we?" She motioned to the building outside the window.

"Home." He stood and opened the door. After he'd stepped from the carriage, he offered his hand to her. The carriage rolled away, and he gestured to the steps leading up to the stone façade home towering above the street.

Her head tipped back to gaze up at the town house. "This is your home?" She stared at him, her mouth hanging open and her eyes the size of pies.

Edmund nodded.

"Who are you?" Jess turned to stare at him.

He took her by the hand and led her up the stairs to the front door. Without a knock, the door swung open allowing them entrance.

A butler stepped forward and bowed. "Welcome home, my lord. How may I be of service?"

"Please draw a bath and have dinner sent to my room. The lady will be joining me."

"As you wish, my lord." The butler bowed and left them in the entranceway.

Jess grabbed him by the shirt and spun him to face her. "Who. Are. You?"

A wolfish smile broke upon his lips. He loved teasing her. Grasping her hands, he removed them from his shirt and held them in his own. "My dear, I'm the Earl of Winterbourne, and you belong to me."

Chapter 5

Jess tried to jerk her hands from his, but he held them tight. *Earl?*

Belong to him? Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. She thrust her jaw out and glared at him. "I don't care if you're the bloody king himself. I belong to no one."

He pulled her close, and she dug her heels into the carpet refusing to get closer. Edmund held her tight in his grasp. Her gaze fell to the buttons of his vest. "Look at me." His command grated against her nerves.

She looked up. The smirk on his lips plucked a string of irritation deep inside. "You insufferable arse. You've taken me from my home to this." She tried to wave her hand, but he still held both her wrists in his grip. "Do you think I'll allow you to make me your whore?"

"You took it upon yourself to steal something precious to me. Since you cannot pay me with anything of substance, your body will suffice for the moment." He cocked his head and grinned. Not a friendly casual expression, but a dangerous promise not unlike the look a predator gives its prey before devouring it completely.

"My body..." She swallowed the fear rising in her throat.

"You need not fear the inevitable." He leaned close, his lips brushing her ear. "It's not as if you didn't enjoy my touch...my kiss."

Jess gasped and pulled away, trying to put distance between her and the beast clothed in finery. He snatched her by the waist and threw her over his shoulder. Jess squealed in surprise and pounded her fists against his back as he mounted the staircase.

"Put me down!" Jess screamed.

When they reached the landing, he pushed open the door and entered the room at the top of the steps. He crossed to the bed and dumped her onto the plush coverlet. Jess' hair tumbled free from its knot. She struggled to get her bearings and finally found the floor. Feet firmly planted next to the bed, she pushed her hair from her eyes and glared around the room, searching for the heartless mongrel.

Edmund stood with his back against the door, watching her with equal parts disinterest and amusement.

"You might as well kill me now." She straightened her skirts and pushed her hair back from her face. "I have no intention of playing a strumpet; not for you or any man."

Edmund held up a key and placed it in his pocket. "This door shall be locked from the outside." He gestured to the door to his right. "That door leads to the common bath, and then through there is my chamber." He turned his attention back to her and approached her with measured steps.

Jess backed away absently. Her instincts told her to run, but she knew it to be hopeless. Miles from home, her sister...how could she have forgotten about her sister, abandoned and alone with one of his men? The scary one no less. Come to think of it, they all had their intimidating qualities. She slammed into the wall as he stalked toward her.

The Earl of Winterbourne placed both his hands on the wall beside her effectively caging her in and stared down at her. "You will do as I bid or I shall make you suffer the consequences." His fingertip on her chin made her flinch. "One telegram to my colleague, and your sister may find her fate much worse than you find your own. Am I understood?"

Jess nodded. "Perfectly." She shivered as he traced his finger along her jaw, then dropped his hand.

He moved away, and she exhaled the breath that had lodged in her chest. When he reached the door leading to the bath, he turned toward her. "Ring the bell if you require anything." He pulled the door closed behind him.

Standing alone in the spacious chamber, she collapsed against the bedpost, her knees weak and trembling. Jess wanted to rage at him. He had effectively kidnapped, blackmailed, and imprisoned her. Her gaze skimmed over the room.

The warm velvet curtains, the silks and damasks covering the bed, and the rich dark wood of the furniture belied the truth. This was her prison cell. The rich trimmings of the room only made her uncomfortable.

Jess had been a farmer's daughter and an innkeeper's wife. She had never even been to London before. Her heart ached at the reminder of her sister with that henchman. What had she called him, the silent one? A shiver wracked her as a soft knock came at the door. The lock clicked open, and a maid poked her head into the room.

"Miss, I brought you some clothes and other things you may be needing." The young woman entered the room and motioned for a boy to follow, pulling a small trunk behind him. After he'd set down the

trunk, he tipped his hat and left the room, shutting the door behind him. The maid opened the trunk and pulled out several gowns, fresh chemises, slippers, and undergarments.

Jess stared at her as the girl put the clothes in the wardrobe. Would she help her escape? The hope reared its head but immediately hid at the thought of causing her sister any pain with her rash actions. *No, I will find another way.* She sat on the bed as the maid put the trunk in the corner.

"There." She turned toward Jess, a perky smile on her lips. "Will you be wanting a bath, miss?"

Glancing down at her stained gown, she nodded. "That sounds lovely. Thank you."

"Oh, forgive me, miss. My name is Anna. It's been so long since I've been a lady's maid, not since..." A look of sadness crossed her face, but she pushed it away quickly covering it with a cheerful smile. "Is there anything else I can do for you, miss?"

"Call me Jess."

"I cannot—" the maid began but Jess cut her words off.

"I insist. I am no lady. Until this moment, I had never even been to a city." She softened her gaze at the maid's open-mouthed expression.

"But the master said—"

"When we are alone, just treat me as your equal." Jess smiled. "I am in need of a friend. That is my only request of you."

Anna beamed at her. "As you wish, miss...I mean, Jess." She moved toward the door. "Ring the bell if you require anything."

"Thank you, Anna."

The door clicked, and the bolt slid home as Anna locked the door behind her. Jess sighed. She wanted nothing more than to curl under the blankets and sleep. Reaching up, she unbuttoned and removed her simple gown. Even her chemise was a rag compared to the new ones the maid had brought to her.

Jess sighed, exhausted and overwhelmed. The pain in her chest intensified at the thought of her sister and her life as she knew it becoming nothing but a distant memory. Edmund's face flashed in her mind, his sinful lips and wicked eyes tormenting her as his words tore a hole in her heart. *You belong to me.*

Chapter 6

As soon as the door closed behind him, he leaned against it and glanced at the large tub in the center of the room. The steam curled up from the bath water as the servant turned off the tap.

"Have Anna take her some fresh clothes." Edmund addressed the young man who nodded then took his leave.

He raked his hand through his hair before unbuttoning the borrowed clothing. Edmund tossed the vest and shirt onto the floor. He toed out of the shoes, then peeled off the trousers and shorts. When he eased himself into the water, he let the sting of the heat distract him from the thought of her in the next room.

Her. That woman. He dipped his head beneath the water and resurfaced. Wiping his wet hair away from his face, he leaned back against the tub and relaxed. Well, tried to relax. His cock twitched. He wanted her more, since he knew what her lips tasted like, what her body felt like pressed against his own. But he had more important things to worry about.

Simon would find the jewels, and Monty would find a lead in Scotland. Without the information he'd hoped to gain in trade for the gems, he was forced to redirect his search. He ground his teeth. Edmund couldn't place the blame on her for the deal falling through, but she did remove the gems from the purse. Perhaps he'd been too hasty in allowing her access to them, but he'd needed a place to hide them, somewhere no one would think to look. He closed his eyes. At this point it mattered very little.

He heard the maid enter the room next door. The chatter of the two women was muted by the wood. It wouldn't surprise him if she tried to negotiate for the girl to release her. Even if she did escape, it would not take long for him to track her down. With his contacts through Simon and Monty, there was no part of London or the whole continent where she could hide. He frowned. Even with those contacts he couldn't find a scrap of information to lead him to the one thing he

desired.

The door clicked. Edmund opened his eyes to find the timid country mouse watching him from the doorway.

"I beg your pardon." She stammered, moving to pull the door closed.

"Come here." Edmund motioned for her, water splashing over the rim of the tub. He remembered where he was and grinned. Poor, timid thing. It wasn't right to tease her, but seeing the blush steal across her cheeks and her defiant, flashing eyes tempted him.

She pushed open the door and entered the room wearing only her chemise. The angle of light striking her gown left nothing to his imagination. Every curve shone stark against the linen. Her eyes remained downcast as he admired the blush climbing along her neck.

"Join me." He'd meant it as a question, but it left his lips as a command.

Her head snapped up, eyes wide. "No." She shook her head, reaching for the door.

Edmund stood, sloshing water over the sides of the tub. "Stop."

She froze, her hand hovering on the handle, and refused to turn her head in his direction. The curtain of her hair shielded her face. Her body trembled as he stepped from the bath.

Wrapping the towel around his waist, he moved closer to where she stood. He halted a breath from her. "Look at me."

Jess turned her head up to meet his gaze. Her eyes shone bright with defiance and unshed tears. She pressed her lips together in a thin line as if to keep from saying something unwise.

"Take the bath," he said, turning from her. Edmund walked into his room and closed the door behind him, locking it. He rested against the door and fisted a hand in his hair.

He had grown used to having people obey him without question, but this woman, she challenged him at every opportunity. Her bearing spoke of a woman far above her rank. Damn her for churning this desire that had lain dormant inside of him for so long.

Edmund moved to the table where a decanter of his favorite whisky sat. He poured some into a glass and took a drink. It burned the lust raging inside his body. Sitting before the fire, he leaned back and closed his eyes. He had to wait for word from Simon and Monty before moving forward with his plans. Until then, what else could he do? A knock at the door shook him from his thoughts.

"Come." He called and then took another drink.

His butler entered the room, a tray in his hands. The man moved toward the small desk near the window and placed the tray upon it. "Your dinner, my lord."

"Thank you, Bates." Edmund stood, adjusting the towel around his

waist.

"Here is your post as well." Bates handed him the letters and bowed. "My lord." With a nod, he left the room.

Edmund flipped through the letters. An invitation caught his attention. He moved to the desk and picked up the silver letter opener. Breaking the seal, he opened it and read the contents. A Christmas masquerade to be held the following evening at Forsythe manor.

Anger clenched in his gut, and he crushed the invitation in his fist. How dare they send an invitation to him after the last ball? He moved to the fireplace to toss the invitation into the flames when an idea struck him. This provided the perfect opportunity to search the house. Perhaps some clues remained as to what happened that night.

It wouldn't do to attend alone. Perhaps he could find someone willing to attend the masquerade with him at such short notice. He laid the invitation on the desk. His gaze moved to the door leading to the bath as his lips curved into a smile.

He crossed the room and realized he still only wore a towel. Quickly putting on a robe, he moved to the bath door. Edmund unlocked the door and hesitated long enough to knock once before pushing it open.

She stood in the center of the room, water dripping from her hair, her body wrapped in a towel. Jess screeched when she saw him. "Do you have no manners?"

"Come here." He heard her sigh as he returned to his room.

"You have done nothing but issue commands since the first moment I met you." She stomped into the room behind him.

He tossed her his spare robe from the wardrobe, and she pulled it on, letting the towel slip to the floor. Edmund arched his brow as his cock stirred. Pushing aside the image of her naked beneath the silk, he watched her tie the sash and pick up the towel to dry her hair. He'd never seen a woman thus. Fresh from the bath, pink and unadorned by frivolous trappings. Her blue eyes met his.

"And yet you still haven't learned to obey without question," he retaliated, hoping to see her hackles rise again.

"You insolent blackguard. Do you have a caring bone in your entire body? Or have you grown so accustomed to everyone obeying your every whim that you issue orders without consideration for anyone but yourself?" She threw the towel at him, and it landed with a thud against his chest.

"Are you finished with your temper tantrum?" he asked. At her scowl, he pushed forward, motioning toward the desk where the food sat. "Come eat something."

With a huff, Jess approached the table, her eyes narrowed on him. He could not fault her for her apprehension. She reached out and

plucked a sandwich off the tray. He did the same and took a bite.

"I realize you don't trust me, and to be quite honest, I don't trust you either." He finished the sandwich and washed it down with the whisky.

"At least you're observant." She took a bite and quickly devoured the entire sandwich. Reaching for another, she glanced at him. "May I?"

Edmund waved his hand for her to do as she wished. He watched in fascination as she consumed half the tray. She poured a bit of wine for herself and took a healthy swallow. The look of utter bliss spreading across her face made him instantly hard.

He cleared his throat. "If you've had your fill, I have a proposition for you."

Jess cradled the wine in her hands and watched him warily. "What kind of proposition?"

His lips twisted at the direction of her thoughts. "Nothing that vulgar I assure you." He stepped closer and fingered the sleeve of the silk dressing gown she wore. "But you could work your debt off much more quickly if you used the assets God gave you."

She gasped as their eyes locked. "What is the proposition?"

"I need you to accompany me to a social event." Edmund watched her expression of concern melt into one of curiosity.

"What sort of event?" she asked then took a sip of the wine.

"A masquerade ball."

Her eyes went wide. "You wish for me to accompany you to a masquerade ball?"

Edmund nodded. "Tomorrow evening."

"And where shall I find a costume at such late notice?" She shelved her hand on her hip and stared at him.

He set his glass down and allowed his gaze to travel over her, head to foot then back again. "I believe I have the perfect costume already in my possession, so there is no concern on that account." Edmund slipped his hand around her waist and pulled her against him. "But you'll have to play the role as if your very life depended on it."

Her hands pressed against his chest, pushing him away. "What role? And why would it matter if I failed to play the role to your satisfaction?"

"Because your life does depend on it, my pet." He grasped her chin in his hand and forced her to look up. "Until I say otherwise, you are my mistress."

"Your mistress!" she shouted, trying to wrench herself from his grasp. "No one will believe I am a kept woman, and furthermore, what will happen when I pay off my debt and return to my life on the North Road?" Disbelief tainted her words, and her hands grasped the

robe he wore.

"When the time comes, I shall deal with that particular issue, until then..." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Why lie and tell them I'm your mistress?" She stared at him. "You are a lord, a member of parliament. Why would you take your mistress to a social event?"

"I do not care what they think of me. It would take more than scandal to remove me from my position." He placed his hand on the nape of her neck, the damp strands of hair sticking to his fingers. "With you playing my mistress, I shall avoid the swooning debutants who would gladly crawl over shattered glass to take a place by my side."

"Any woman willing to waste her time or her breath on you makes me question her sanity." Jess smirked at him.

"You have every right to detest me, and frankly, I care little about your injured opinion of me." He tightened his grip on her neck and waist, pulling their bodies closer, silk clad skin against silk clad skin. "Play the part well, and I may grant your freedom much sooner. But play me false, and I swear to God I shall make you regret it."

"I did not agree to be your pawn." She frowned at him.

"You had your chance to right this, and you forfeited that opportunity. So whether you like it or not, my dear, I shall take payment where I find value." Edmund watched her lip tremble, and a pang of emotion pulled somewhere deep in his chest. He buried it with a cocky smirk.

"I hate you." Jess glared at him.

"I don't expect you to do anything other than play your part when we're in public." He released her and turned back to the desk to refill his glass with whisky. "Go to sleep."

He heard the soft footsteps and the slam of the adjoining door. Turning to scan his empty room, he downed the liquor in one swallow. What the hell was he thinking having the harpy play his mistress for the whole of London society to see?

Edmund glanced at the door and groaned. As long as she kept her mouth shut, the evening would go smoothly. He ran his hand through his hair a few times before forgoing the whisky and collapsing on the bed to stare at the ceiling until dawn.

Chapter 7

"**Y**ou have such lovely hair, miss." Anna pulled the brush through Jess' hair a few more times.

"Thank you, Anna." Jess sighed as she watched the maid work to carefully craft a gorgeous coiffure. She'd barely slept at all, and when she did wake the sun was already high above London. Her encounter with her captor the evening before did nothing to soothe her nerves. Lord Winterbourne held his rank and title over her. He'd requested she play the part of his mistress. What kind of man was he? His eyes spoke of disdain and disinterest, but she'd felt his attraction to her in his kiss. He could have taken her had he wanted, but he'd refrained.

Twisting her hands in her robe, she glanced at Anna in the reflection. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course, my lady." Anna beamed at her.

"How long have you worked for Lord Winterbourne?"

Anna pinned the braid to her head and smiled. "I have worked for his lordship for two years."

"What kind of man is he?" Jess watched the maid's reaction finding only sincerity in her expression.

"He is a fair but strict master." She twisted a few more strands and pinned them into place.

"Do you know the truth of my being here?" Jess asked.

"I do." Anna met her gaze in the mirror. "I know not what you did to cross him, my lady, but it would be wise for you to cooperate with his wishes...for your sake."

Jess shrugged. "I am my own woman. He has kidnapped me and holds me against my will. I find it difficult to acquiesce to his demands when I know not what type of man I am to obey."

"He is a good man, my lady." Anna curled the wisps of hair around her face and the locks laying across her left shoulder. "He will not see you come to harm. There, what do you think?" She stepped back and allowed Jess to inspect her hair.

"Lovely. Thank you, Anna." Never had she worn such an elaborate style. Pearls wove elegantly through the intricate coif. She looked

nothing like herself, especially after the small amount of powder, rouge, and kohl Anna had applied.

"Come, let us put the gown on." The maid pulled on the appropriate undergarments and a small bustle.

Eyeing the satin gown on the bed, Jess felt the distinct tightening in her stomach as the fear settled. He wanted her to act the part of a lady...of his mistress, and yet she had no idea how either of those two types of women would behave in such a situation. Weren't they at odds with each other? Surely a lady would not play the part of a mistress, lest she be ostracized from society. *You're a widow*, she reminded herself. *Yes, but I've never tasted passion.* How could she play the part of a woman in love if she'd never been captivated by a passionate love?

Anna lifted the gown for Jess to step into. The maid pulled it up, allowing it to settle on her hips. "Fits as though it was made for you, my lady," Anna said as she pulled the bodice tight across Jess' chest.

As Anna reached to tighten the laces of the corset, Jess flinched. "Not too tight, Anna. I've never worn such a contraption before. I would hate to disgrace Lord Winterbourne if I fainted."

The laces loosened enough for her to breathe again. Inhaling deeply, she allowed Anna to finish lacing and straightening her gown. The satin moved like the ripples of water across a calm lake. She stared at herself in the mirror. The deep sapphire of the gown enhanced her pale skin and brightened her eyes, turning them a bewitching shade of blue. She pressed her hand to her throat.

"Here are your gloves." Anna handed her a pair of elbow length gloves and moved behind her. "My lord requested you wear this as well," Anna said, draping a soft piece of black velvet around her neck. A single sapphire shimmered against the hollow of her throat. The maid fastened the choker and stepped back to admire the final product. "You're a heavenly vision. Lady Katherine would be moved to tears of joy to see you in her gown."

"Who?" Jess' head snapped around to face the maid, her own reflection forgotten. "Who is Lady Katherine?"

Anna pressed her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. "Please forget I said that. I misspoke. The master will be most displeased if he..." She choked back a sob and waved her hand. "I believe you're ready for the ball, my lady." Anna backed toward the door.

Jess pressed her lips together. Her heart ached at the thought of wearing another woman's gown. Had it belonged to his wife? Was he married? Widowed? A landslide of questions trapped her. Perhaps she should ask him herself. If he desired her help, then the least he could do is tell her the truth of his circumstances.

The door stood open. With a sigh, Jess walked toward it and stood

on the landing at the top of the stairs. Glancing down, she saw Lord Winterbourne leaning against the bannister. He straightened when he saw her. Jess took a deep breath and descended the stairs slowly, her gloved hands gliding over the polished wooden railing.

A simple, black suit complimented his height and broad shoulders. The waistcoat and cravat echoed the sapphire of her gown. Every inch of him portrayed the image of a confident gentleman. A mischievous glint in his frostbitten grey eyes belied the cold that lingered in his heart. His gaze narrowed as she came closer, and he raked a hand through his thick, dark hair. The muscle in his jaw twitched as he frowned but did not speak. He didn't have to. It was obvious he disliked what he saw.

"Do I disappoint you, my lord?" she asked as she stopped on the final step, bringing them eye level with each other.

He reached out and brushed his fingertips across the base of her neck, just below the velvet choker. The contact sent a shiver of need and loathing coursing through her veins. Dropping his hand, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a simple silver mask with small sapphires decorating it. "Wear this." He placed it in her hand and turned as the butler approached with his greatcoat.

Before she could reply, Anna offered her a long black cloak lined with white fur. Turning to thank Anna, she found the maid already retreating. *Strange*.

"Come along." Edmund's voice snapped her from her thoughts.

She turned back to him. He stood in the doorway tugging his gloves on, a cane tucked under his arm. Jess pulled the hood up and snuggled deeper into the cloak as she stepped out into the cold December night. A carriage awaited them at the base of the steps, the glossy black reflecting the lamplight and frost.

He held his hand out for her to enter the coach. Even through the fabric of the gloves, the brush of their fingertips made her cheeks warm. Why did his touch ignite such a reaction inside of her? She wanted nothing from him except her freedom. Jess sat in the coach, and he sat across from her, his knees brushing against her own. She moved away from him, leaning against the far side of the coach.

Edmund tapped the roof of the coach, and it lurched into motion. After a few moments of no sound but the coach and the street noise outside, he cleared his throat. "You will remain by my side unless otherwise directed. Say nothing of our arrangement. Play the part I've asked of you, that is all."

Jess turned to face him, his eyes bored into hers. "As you wish, Lord Winterbourne," she replied with disdain.

"Edmund." His voice was so low she'd nearly missed it.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Edmund. You may address me as such from this point forward." He grinned at her. "If you are to play the convincing role of my mistress, I expect you would use my given name." He leaned closer.

She flinched out of reflex, but whether it was from fear of him or the desire his touch enflamed, she couldn't tell. Jess looked away.

He sighed and caught her chin in his hand, forcing her to meet his gaze. "No one will believe you are my lover if you do not act the part." He caressed her jaw. "Come now, let me see the longing in your gaze."

Jess glared at him for a moment then closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She thought of the one thing she wanted most in the world. When she opened her eyes, he grinned at her.

"Much better. Although I must admit curiosity as to what you are thinking of that would put such a look on your face." His eyes darkened. "Anyone seeing that look would believe you were mine." He leaned close, his breath brushing across her lips. "Perhaps I should make you mine in every way leaving no doubt."

A sweet smile stole across her lips. "You may think I belong to you, and you may take what you want from my body." She narrowed her gaze at him. "But there is one part of me you will never possess."

He chuckled, the sound hollow and devoid of humor. "I've no use for sentiment." Edmund sat back and looked out the window. "You are aware of the consequences should this evening fail?"

Jess crossed her arms. "My sister."

Edmund nodded. "I expect you to be on your best behavior. Should you be uncertain of what to do, remain silent."

With an unladylike snort, Jess turned her attention to the streets outside. They continued on for a while in silence until the carriage rolled to a stop. Edmund descended first and offered his hand to help her from the coach.

"Your mask." He plucked the mask from her hand and tied it on for her. Slipping a black domino into place, he then offered his arm to her without a word.

She laid her hand on his arm and together they ascended the stairs to the brightly lit mansion. A butler met them at the door and took their outer garments. Jess shivered at the brush of the cool air across her skin.

He laid her hand on his arm and escorted her down the hall and into the ballroom. She stole a glance at him. His profile remained sharp, lips unsmiling as his eyes glinted like ice against the dark mask. *Handsome as the devil and twice as wicked.* She licked her lips and forced her attention back to the entry way they were approaching. As they passed under the archway, Jess gasped.

The ballroom glittered with evergreen garlands and bright red

bows. Tinsel and frosted ornaments hung from the ceiling reflecting the light from the gas lamps. A row of tables lined one wall where servants poured drinks and offered hors d'oeuvres. Elegant ladies and handsome gentleman milled about, but the sight on the main floor made her stop.

Her breath caught as she watched the couples whirling in circles as they danced to the orchestra. A deep part of her heart twisted and ached at the sight. Jess had always wanted to dance, but she'd never had the opportunity to do so before. As she soaked in the sight of the couples and swayed with the music, a tightening on her arm brought her back to the moment and the man standing beside her.

"Come with me." His brusque tone snapped her from the pleasant daydream.

Forcing a smile, she followed him as he led her around the dance floor. He nodded at a few people who greeted him, keeping a firm hand over hers. The music slowed as the song came to an end. Jess admired the lovely gowns and festive decorations. The sheer opulence overwhelmed her. She felt as though she were Alice lost in wonderland a fantastical tale from the book her father had given her on her wedding day. A pinch would surely wake her from such a magnificent dream. His grip tightened again, twisting her skin through the glove. She glared at Edmund. It couldn't be a dream, although the man escorting her was truly mad.

Before she could speak, Edmund led her to the center of the dance floor as the faint strains of a waltz began. His hand settled on her waist, while the other rested palm to palm with hers. "Follow my lead."

Jess nodded and allowed him to lead her. The gentle pressure on her waist guided her in the motion of the dance. She fell into the rhythm, quickly following every subtle hint his body lent hers. His effortless grace translated into her movements. *He may be a pompous arse, but he waltzes like a dream.* As they moved together on the floor, Jess hardly noticed the crowd around them, watching with curious eyes and gaping jaws. Glancing up at her partner, she blushed as she met his cool gaze.

He watched her, his eyes searching hers, the barest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. Caught up in the joy of the dance, she beamed at him. A flicker of amusement crossed his face, and a smile stole his lips for a moment. He spun her as the music rushed around them. Breathless and overjoyed, she held him tight as they waltzed. When the music came to an end, he released her and bowed.

Fanning herself with her hand, she bowed to him. He took her hand and led her from the dance floor. Her heart raced and she knew her face was stained pink from the exertion. How she wished she had

a fan. The crush of people had been forgotten while she danced, but as they moved through the room, her heart pounded and Jess found it difficult to catch her breath. She pressed her hand to her chest and closed her eyes.

Edmund led her until they reached a small archway opening onto a balcony. She sighed from the pure bliss as the chill of the December night bit into her overheated skin. He froze beside her and dropped her hand from his arm. The balcony stood empty except for the two of them. She turned toward him, and his gaze riveted on her throat.

Her hand flew to her neck, lightly tracing the choker. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

He shook his head and took a step toward the door. "Remain here. I shall return in a moment." With those words, Edmund disappeared back into the ballroom.

Jess rested her hand against the stone column. The night sky shone dimly through the fog of the city. She sighed. The landscape outside her inn held a much more beautiful view. She longed for her simple home, her simple life. The most frustrating part of it had to be him. He had moments where he seemed to read her like a book, taking initiative to insure her comfort. But his harsh, cold words and possessive demeanor grated against her nerves. She closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the heavens. The sound of a man's voice broke her solitude and her heart ceased its powerful rhythm at the implication of his words.

"Well, well, where has Winterbourne been hiding you, strumpet?"

Chapter 8

Edmund carried a glass of punch as he returned to the small balcony where he'd left Jess. He replayed the evening in his mind. Her reactions to the ball, the joy in her expression as they danced, the look of overwhelming panic after their waltz. Having her in his arms on the dance floor gave him a glimpse of the woman beneath the exterior of a common innkeeper's wife. Her eyes glittered with merriment, her cheeks flushed from exertion. It fixed an alarming image in his mind, one that was cemented by her sigh of contentment as they stepped out onto the balcony. The thought of Jess beneath him as he drove into her, teasing her with his mouth and his fingers, made him hard.

Clearing his throat, he stepped through the door leading to the balcony. He dropped the glass at the sight of Jess pinned against the wall, a shadowed figure trailing his tongue along her neck. Fury raged in his veins, boiling to the point of physical pain.

"Get your damned hands off of her," he growled as he clapped a hand on the intruder who dared touch what belonged to him.

The man yelped as Edmund threw him off of Jess. He stepped in front of her and watched the coward climb to his feet.

"Damn it all, Winterbourne." The man straightened and brushed off his jacket. "I don't see what all the fuss is about. How can you expect anything less when you bring a tasty morsel such as her to a feast?"

Edmund shook his head. "Still can't keep your hands occupied with your own wife, Morgan. After that incident with the Forsythe chit, I'm surprised you'd been invited at all."

Morgan shook his fist. "Keep going, Winterbourne, and I'll tell them you've brought a whore into their house."

Closing the gap between them, Edmund grasped Morgan by the shirt and lifted him off the ground. "I'd expect nothing less of the rat who'd sell his own mother for a quick tumble." He dropped the man. "Get out of my sight."

Morgan stumbled away, fixing his shirt and cravat while mumbling

beneath his breath. He shot a scowl at Edmund before disappearing into the ballroom.

Edmund turned to Jess. Her eyes remained downcast as she rocked back and forth, her arms crossed. He brushed a loose strand of hair back from her face and pulled her into his embrace. She leaned against him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Thank you," she murmured into his jacket.

He tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze. Her eyes were dry, but he saw the uncertainty swimming in their depths. *Damn Morgan for cornering her.* He shouldn't have left her alone. She trembled in his arms. The wind picked up, encircling them with its chill.

"Follow me." Edmund took her hand and led her back into the ballroom. Once inside, he placed her hand on his arm and allowed his gaze to sweep over her. Even after such an ordeal, she presented a composed front. Her hair and mask seemed to be in good order. She betrayed no outward signs of her inner turmoil, but he felt the tightening of her hand on his arm as it trembled. They swiftly moved along the perimeter of the room. Upon reaching the hall, he located the study and slipped inside the door pulling her into the room behind him.

"What are we doing here?" Her voice echoed her awe as she glanced around the room. The deep, rich fabrics and dark, solid furnishings reflected the expensive tastes of the owner. Her gaze traveled across the room as he closed the door behind them.

Quickly moving toward the desk, he shifted through the drawers, knowing exactly what he was looking for. He'd seen it the night they'd taken the jewels. Edmund pulled open a drawer and flipped through the stack of papers. A seal caught his eye, and he snatched the receipt from the pile and tucked it into his jacket pocket. When he glanced up, he frowned at the sight greeting him.

Jess stood with her hands firmly planted on her hips with a look of supreme disappointment on her face. "You are nothing more than a thief!"

He closed the drawer and stepped around the desk. "That would make you my accomplice, would it not?" Edmund grinned when she sputtered and snapped her mouth shut. He closed the distance between them, and she backed away instinctively. Her sparkling blue eyes blinked beneath the mask, which only enhanced their lovely charm. He approached until she collided with the bookcase. Bracing his hands on the shelves behind her, he boxed her there.

Edmund watched as the crimson blush stole from across her chest, crept up her neck, and stained her cheeks. Her hands flattened against his chest as if in a futile attempt to push him away.

"Let me go." The words lacked the power to do anything more than make him grin. She narrowed her gaze at him. "I've no wish to be a part of your crimes."

Leaning close, he whispered in her ear ensuring the caress of his breath against her sensitive skin. "Like it or not, my sweet, you're as much a criminal as I am." He touched his tongue to her earlobe and smiled when she gasped.

"You're a wicked man, Lord Winterbourne."

He pressed his lips to the spot just below her ear. She whimpered as he raked his teeth against her skin. "Being wicked has its benefits."

Her hands fisted in his coat. "Edmund...stop..." She panted the words between gasping breaths as he suckled and nipped along the skin of her neck. "Someone...will...find...us..." A moan tore from her throat as he slipped lower and traced the exposed skin of her chest with his tongue.

"A dalliance at a masquerade isn't unheard of." He turned her in his arms, and she gripped the shelves, bracing herself as he pressed against her from behind. *Damn that bustle.* He swore as he slid his hands up her waist to cup her breasts through the fabric. Edmund wanted to tease her, to drive her to the point of madness. Being near her distracted him. Perhaps if he actually bedded her he might be able to regain some of his sanity. Her head fell back as he slid a hand into her bodice, filling his palm with her warm breast.

"We...I can't..." She shook her head as if trying to convince herself of something. He pinched her nipple between his fingers. "Edmund!"

He grasped her chin in his other hand and kissed her jaw. The click of the door opening echoed through the room. Edmund slipped his hand from her bodice and slowly moved as to shield her from the person entering the room.

A young man stood in the doorway and glanced at Edmund, a sudden wave of embarrassment crossing his face. "My apologies, I had not realized someone was here." He slipped from the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Edmund glanced at Jess. She stood with her arms crossed, her body trembling. Raking a hand through his hair, he exhaled sharply. *I'm no better than Morgan.* He brushed a curl away from her face.

Jess' gaze snapped up to meet his. He'd expected regret and tears but saw only desire, hot and fierce, burning in her eyes. Had that lad not intervened, he'd have taken her right there in the study. He cleared his throat, uncertain he wanted to examine his actions much longer.

"Fix your mask," he said as he straightened his cravat and coat. Edmund moved toward the door and opened it for her. They exited the study and wandered in the direction of the ballroom where the

music wafted up amidst the chatter of the guests.

She walked beside him, but they did not touch. Keeping her eyes forward and her chin up, Jess once again pasted on the perfect mask of elegance. Had he not known her origins, he would have assumed her to be of noble blood.

Once they arrived at the front door, he collected their garments and helped her don her cloak. They descended the front steps and located their carriage. She took his hand only to step into the conveyance. The entire journey to his home, neither of them spoke a single word. Her attention remained fixed on the world beyond the carriage glass.

Edmund waited until they returned to his home to speak. "Go to your room."

Without so much as a glance at him, she ascended the staircase. He watched her quiet grace in swaying blue satin until she disappeared into her room. At the click of the door, he jerked his cravat free and entered his study. Pouring a glass of brandy, he stared into the fire.

He could handle her irate words and scathing rebukes. The raging and fighting, he could understand. Edmund downed the liquid, letting it burn a path to his gut. Her refusal to look at him, to acknowledge his presence irked him. He poured another drink. But the silence drove a wedge so deep into his soul he feared it would shatter what remained of his control.

"Why should I even care?" he murmured, dropping into his chair. *Once her debt is paid, she'll no longer be any concern of mine.* The unspoken thought lingered in his mind. He shook his head and slipped the paper from his pocket.

Receipt of Purchase for one sapphire and diamond necklace. He scanned the receipt and then took another drink. *The necklace she was wearing when she vanished from your summer gala.* This would lead him to her; he felt it deep in his bones.

His thoughts drifted to Jess and the sweet taste of her skin, the cries of pleasure that had spilled from her lips at his touch. Edmund swore and pushed the thoughts aside. He had work to do. Tucking the receipt in his pocket again, he stood and finished the liquor in his glass. *Enough with the pretty, blue-eyed distraction, I have a mission to accomplish.*

Chapter 9

Jess stared out the front window watching the carriages and bustling city outside. A lovely park lay across the street, and she longed to go for a walk. The sun slowly set against the buildings. Another day gone...where was he? She sighed as she leaned against the glass. It had been three days since the masquerade ball, since she'd last spoken to Edmund. The morning after the ball she'd found Anna grinning down at her when she woke.

As the maid helped her dress, she had explained her master's orders. He'd given explicit instructions to allow Jess to have free rein of the house, but she was not allowed her to leave the property under any circumstances. Still a prisoner, but a part of her heart remained grateful for the freedom no matter how miniscule.

After the first day, she knew the entire layout of the house and every servant's name. She even joined them for supper in the kitchen when Edmund did not return. That evening she'd spent reading in the small library curled up before the fire and sipping wine. Never had she had the time or the inclination for such decadence, but with nothing to occupy her hands, she'd needed to find something to distract her mind. She'd tried to offer her help to the servants, but they stared at her in horror while trying to assure her that they had everything under control.

The second day progressed much as the first. By dawn on the third morning, Jess could no longer take the idleness. She had marched into the kitchen and requested to make something special for the servants. While the cook quietly relented, probably in anticipation of her failure, the rest of the servants tried to dissuade her. They watched amazed as she took to baking like a fish takes to a cool mountain stream. The servants had no idea who she was or where she'd come from, but they were in awe of her comfort in the kitchen.

The morning had been spent in levity and companionship, something Jess had craved over the last several days. After consuming

most of the delicious treats they'd made together, Jess found herself drawn to the front window and the hustle of the city outside. *London*. Her entire life passed without even a glimpse of the wonders contained within these streets. Half curiosity, half homesick, she sat watching the world through a glimmering pane of glass.

The front door closed with a thud. Jess heard the rustle of feet on carpet in the entryway. Murmured voices met her ears as she strained to listen. Edmund appeared in the doorway, and Jess clenched her fists in the cushion beneath her to keep from jumping up to greet him. *Get it together. You're not a faithful hound, and he is most assuredly not your master.*

His gaze narrowed as he leaned against the doorframe. Jess turned her back to him, returning her gaze to the darkening street. He'd ignored her for three days. She certainly wasn't going to be the first to initiate a conversation or throw herself at his feet. The soft tap of his shoes on the floor echoed as he came closer. A shiver slid down her limbs as he paused behind her. The heat from his body seeped into the back of her gown.

"Go upstairs and dress."

"I am dressed." The command made her bristle, but she refused to budge.

He exhaled sharply. "Obstinate," he mumbled beneath his breath.

She heard the exasperation in his tone and crossed her arms. Jess hadn't realized she'd missed the timbre of his voice. Her heart slowed as if attempting complete silence to allow his voice to embrace her fully.

"Go upstairs and put on an evening gown." He hesitated for a moment then added, "Please."

Her head snapped around. His grey eyes glimmered in the lamplight as he stared down at her. "What did you just say?"

His lips thinned, and he cocked his head. "Don't tempt my patience." He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. Leaning close, his lips brushed the delicate shell. "Quickly, before I change my mind."

Jess licked her lips and nodded, barely able to keep her thoughts in any organized coherent pattern. His proximity wreaked havoc on her senses. Since their kiss and the subsequent silence, she'd hoped the painful ache at his absence was merely the consequence of being ripped from her home and thrown into a new situation. She pressed her hand to her heart. Alas, the ache moved from a pain in her chest to a desire simmering through her body. Jess could not deny her attraction to him any longer, even if he acted like a brutish cad and treated her like a lowly servant.

She slipped from the window seat and brushed past him. He did

not reach for her and said nothing else, but when she glanced back at him, his eyes blazed with heat and determination. Swallowing any trepidation, she ran up the stairs and into her room before she made a fool of herself.

A soft knock echoed moments later. Jess opened the door to find Anna holding a lovely crimson and gold gown. She watched with wide eyes as the maid laid the garment on the bed. *What adventure does Edmund have in store this evening?*

Chapter 10

The opera house loomed before them. Edmund smiled a bit at the sharp intake of breath from the woman on his arm. When he glanced at her, he gritted his teeth against the surge of lust that bolted through him. Her painted lips hung open in awe as she took in every detail. The foyer buzzed with chatter and commotion as they wove through the crowd. He led her up a staircase and down a hallway. Drawing the curtains aside, he motioned for her to enter the small, reserved balcony. Her bright eyes darted back and forth, drinking in the ambiance and rich, vibrant colors.

He'd been to the opera many times. Frankly, it bored him. But tonight it had been worth the inconvenience if only to see her reaction to what he had always classified as the mundane. Experiencing the world through her eyes proved to be an adventure. One he hadn't expected.

Jess sat and glanced over the railing. Her look of sheer joy stole his breath. He sat down next to her and crossed his arms. His eyes never moved from her. When she turned to him, his heart slammed in his chest and his cock twitched. He pushed away both unwelcome reactions and focused on the blinding smile on her lips. He'd thought seeing her happy would make him uncomfortable. Never had he expected the gentle pull of affection toward her. Edmund frowned at the thought and shoved the feelings aside.

Noting his frown, Jess leaned closer, her breath brushing his cheek. "Can I ask why we're here?" Her smile wobbled a bit. "Are you planning on stealing something else?"

He heard the teasing in her voice but also picked up the subtle warning in her expression. Edmund scoffed. "Careful, my pet, you still haven't fulfilled your debt to me." He rested his hand on her thigh. "Unless you've changed your mind." His grin cemented the image, and she scowled at him.

"Find another woman more interested in conceding to your

lascivious ways." Jess turned her attention back to the crowd beneath them.

Edmund's gaze traveled from her shoulder, up the curve of her neck, and stopped as her frown slowly transformed into an awestruck o of delight. He sighed inwardly and tapped his fingertips on the top of his cane. His reaction had been rude, but if he hadn't pushed her away with his words, she may have seen though his carefully crafted façade.

He'd nearly told her the truth. The opera, the gown, the lavish dinner...they served no purpose other than to bring her pleasure. When he'd seen her curled up in the window seat staring into the street with a nearly palpable longing, he realized how much he wanted to see her smile, to see the look of wonder as he had at the ball when she danced.

The impulsive action reaped the intended reward. As the lights dimmed and the opera began, his gaze ventured no farther than the small balcony where they sat. Watching her brought him joy. The thought slammed into him with the force of a bullet, tearing into his carefully guarded flesh. He clutched his cane harder.

Laughter filled the room and hers rang clear and true above the rest. He frowned. This would only be a complication. He had spent those three fruitless days talking to Simon's men as they searched for information concerning the sale of the jewels. The shop owner knew nothing of the gem's history. A man had sold the jewels to him for a tidy sum and disappeared. None of his contacts could garner any information beyond that. He tapped his fingers on the cane and watched Jess' lips curve into a smile exposing a perfect row of teeth.

As the opera came to a close, Edmund stood and offered his arm. The gentle pressure of her hand on his arm filled him with a warring sense of both fulfillment and need.

"Thank you." Her murmured words caused him to glance at her soft, delicate face.

Edmund cleared his throat as if trying to dislodge the uncomfortable emotion burning in his chest. With a nod, he led her from the box and out into the crisp night air. After helping her into the carriage, he sat across from her and stared out the window. For once in his life, Edmund found himself unable to find the right words, so he allowed the silence to stretch between them. Why did this woman affect him so? She challenged him at every turn, irritated him beyond tolerance, and still he could not help but long for her company.

"Did you enjoy the show?" Her words interrupted his silent musing.

"I've seen this opera before."

She cocked her head and smiled, a twinkle of lamplight reflecting

in her eyes. "That's not what I asked."

He heaved an irritated sigh. "Are you always this impertinent?"

"Do you always have to behave like obstinate mule who refuses to budge?"

Edmund leaned back against the cushions and folded his arms across his chest. "That's exactly the analogy I would expect from a farmer's daughter." He felt a stab of regret at his harsh words when her smile fell and pain flickered in her eyes. "And yes, I do."

Her lips tilted up again, but the hurt in her eyes remained. "You're a cold man, Lord Winterbourne."

"Edmund, and I cannot change who I am."

"But that is what confuses me. Your actions and your words are at odds with each other." Jess twisted her hands in the fabric of her gown.

"Please, elaborate." He teased her, but something deep inside of him wanted to hear her observations.

"You stole those jewels, and yet you claim you are not a thief."

"I'm not." When she sighed in exasperation, he continued. "You can't steal something that was yours to begin with."

"The jewels—"

"Belonged to my family. I was merely recovering my own property." He watched the play of emotions across her face.

"What..." She stopped as if realizing it was none of her business to be asking such questions. The matter did not concern her that much was true, but he responded to her unvoiced curiosity anyway.

"I was going to use the jewels to gain information. When you stole them, you jeopardized my mission." He ran his hand across his face and glanced out the window again.

"Mission? Do you work for the queen then?" The confusion in her voice made her sound innocent.

He shook his head. "I work for myself alone."

She opened her mouth to speak but closed it quickly. After a few seconds, her reply filled the space between them. "Of course."

"Was that your only observation into my behavior?"

"I beg your pardon?" Jess turned to face him again.

"You said my actions are at odds with my words. Were there other instances you care to share with me?" He waited. Why was he drawing out the conversation? And what did it matter what this little innkeeper thought of him?

"You seem to anticipate—" she struggled to find the right word—"my needs. And yet, your words are often icy and brusque as if you can hardly tolerate to speak to me."

Her thoughts struck home. He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. She proved observant, intelligent, and confident. A poor, little country

mouse caught in the snare of a calculating man. A desire washed over him, stronger than it had when he'd kissed her at the Forsythe's ball. Those three days he'd spent hunting for information were as much of an escape as an obligation. Being with her made it difficult for him to maintain the façade his life required. She stripped him bare, and he found himself revealing more than he'd ever anticipated. He could truly be himself around her. The sudden realization captured him in a silent panic.

"Have I misspoken?" she asked breaking into his thoughts.

He cleared his throat. "Not at all. Your candid honesty is one of your better points, even though it makes you sound like a harpy."

"See, there. A compliment wrapped in an insult." Jess shook her head. "Are you incapable of giving one without the other?"

"There's no point in flattery." He smirked at her.

"I've seen you compliment people in conversation."

"It can be a powerful motivator." Edmund closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

"Charming lies to manipulate people into doing what you want," she said softly. "Powerful yes, but not at all genteel conduct."

Edmund shrugged. The conversation lapsed into silence, and a few moments later the carriage rolled to a stop. Climbing from the conveyance, he offered his hand to her. As they approached the front door, her skirt snagged and the fabric tore. Jess stumbled but before she could fall Edmund snatched her by the waist and pulled her against his chest.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled against his jacket. "I'll mend the gown."

"Don't worry about it. Anna will take care of the dress."

Her grip on his sleeves tightened as he helped her stand. The door opened to reveal Bates awaiting their arrival. He collected their outer garments and hung them in a small wardrobe. Jess walked toward the staircase. Edmund grasped her elbow unwilling to allow her to leave him so soon. She turned to face him, her lips parted in surprise.

"Join me." He led her into his study. "Bates, that will be all for the evening." With a bow, the butler left them, and Edmund closed the door.

Jess' gaze followed him, her hands clasped behind her back. He moved to the small table and poured two glasses of brandy. Jess accepted the proffered glass, and he watched as she sipped the dark liquid.

"Why did you take me to the opera, Edmund?" She met his gaze over the rim of the glass, licking the edge where a drop of alcohol clung. "You said you had already seen that particular show."

A surge of lust coursed through his veins, and he drank the brandy

in one swallow. "I have my reasons." His reply sounded colder than he'd anticipated, but an image of Jess and her unbridled joy flashed into his mind. He set the glass down and crossed his arms.

She took another sip and set the unfinished brandy on the hearth mantle. He straightened his spine as she stepped closer. He could smell the lavender soap she'd used, the hint of brandy on her breath as she leaned closer. Her fingertips brushed across his lapels. He grasped her wrists, and her lips twisted in a lopsided smile.

"I have discovered something about you." Jess' smile caused his heart to twist in apprehension and pure desire. Another careless word from her lips and the only thing she'd discover is how much pleasure he could bring her.

"And that would be?" He narrowed his eyes, and her smile deepened.

"You're not the cold-hearted bastard you want me to think you are." Jess tried to slide her hands from his grip, but he refused to release her.

"Is that so?" He stroked the soft skin of her inner wrists with his thumbs. With a quick motion, he spun her and wrapped his arms around her, pressing himself against her back. His hands slid along the smooth satin beneath her breasts. "You think you know me so well, do you?"

Her breaths quickened at his touch. "You want people to think you're cold and indifferent, calloused and uncaring." She whimpered as his fingertips trailed over her chest and came to rest against her neck. Her pulse pounded beneath his hand. "You manipulate, steal, and lie while maintaining a proper gentleman's persona."

"You've said as much already. Enough." He whispered as he leaned down pressing a soft kiss against her fluttering pulse. "My question is, do you know me well enough to satisfy me?"

"No one will ever be able to satisfy you, Edmund."

He grasped her chin in his hand and turned her face to see her flashing eyes. Brushing his thumb across her lower lip, he admired the flush of pink as it stained her cheeks. "Such a smart mouth for a country lass. I can think of a much more pleasurable way to utilize that tongue of yours."

Her eyes widened as he closed the remaining space between them and kissed her. He turned her in his arms, not breaking the sweet contact as it stole her breath. Different from previous kisses, this one demanded nothing. It requested her submission to him. He'd longed for her since the night of the masquerade. Hell, even before that. He slid his hand into her hair, pulling her closer and forcing her to open to him.

Heat and brandy mingled on his tongue as he explored her mouth.

She sighed when he slowly loosened her gown with his free hand. He stepped back briefly to pull the cumbersome gown from her body and toss it onto the floor. As he feathered kisses along her jaw, he untied the bustle, then let it tumble to the ground. Jess moaned, and he hooked his thumbs into her drawers, pulling them down her legs.

"Why am I the only one being undressed?" she murmured as he kissed her throat.

He covered her lips with his and whispered in her mouth. "The only thing I want to hear is you moaning my name."

"What—"

He kissed her hard, nipping her lower lip in warning. He pulled the strings of her corset loose with the skill befitting a jewel thief. Tearing it from her body, he focused on the thin chemise she wore. His hands slid beneath the material and cupped her breasts. They filled his palms, and he couldn't help but brush his thumbs across her nipples. The ragged gasp from her lips made him grin. Her clouded gaze betrayed the need raging through her. He pulled the material over her head and glanced at every glorious curve of her naked body. Edmund licked his lips.

"Sit down on that chair." He pointed to the wing-backed armchair before the fireplace. "Place one leg on each arm."

Chapter 11

"What?" Jess stared at him in horror. If she did that, it would...well, expose her, all of her. She tried to cover herself with her hands and backed up a step. He reached out and caught her by the wrist. She collided with his chest as he jerked her against him. The scratch of the fabric against her bare skin brought the simmering desire roaring to life. Her body burned for his touch, but deep inside she feared her inexperience might disappoint him.

"Sit. Down." He led her to the chair and pushed her down onto the velvet cushion. "I want to see all of you." Lifting each leg, he draped it carefully over the padded arms.

Jess closed her eyes. She'd never let her husband look at her like this. Hell, she'd only ever been intimate with him a handful of times and even those encounters had been over in moments not to mention severely unsatisfying. Edmund's kiss alone enflamed whatever part of her had lain dormant during her marriage. *Isn't this what you wanted, passion so hot it singed your soul?*

"Open your eyes, Jess." His deep tenor reverberated through her.

Taking a breath, she met his gaze. He knelt before her, and the soft touch of his warm hands on her thighs pulled an involuntary moan from her throat. He leaned closer, his breath causing a riot of sensations as it brushed her exposed center.

"I want you to watch me."

Her mind ceased to work, and she nodded in reply. A devilish smirk crossed his lips before his tongue darted out to taste her. Jess shivered at the contact. His hands kept a firm grip on her thighs as he devoured her.

"You...you...I..." She whimpered as his wicked tongue caressed the most intimate parts of her. He drew her into his mouth and suckled. Her hips shot off the chair, arching against his face. Mesmerized, she writhed beneath his ministrations. Watching him made her desperate for more. Her body pulsed with need.

He slid his hand from her thigh to tease her before slipping his fingers into her body. Her hands instinctively gripped the chair as her

hips met the rhythm of his hand. Edmund pressed kisses to her thighs as he drove her pleasure higher. When his thumb grazed the sensitive spot he'd suckled before, her body arched higher, searching, begging, pleading.

"Edmund!" she shouted as intense pleasure seized her body. Jess trembled as her body descended into weightless bliss. He leaned back, the lack of contact leaving her bereft. She watched beneath hooded lids as he stood and pulled her to her feet.

Taking her seat, he pulled her astride his lap. His hands settled on her hips. The brush of his trousers against her thighs created a delicious friction.

"Look at me, Jess."

She hesitated for a moment before meeting his intense gaze. The flicker of the fire reflected in his eyes as if trying to penetrate the bottomless grey depths. Jess pressed her palm to his cheek. The light twisted in his eyes as the corners of his mouth turned up into a smile. He reached between them and freed himself from the confines of his trousers. Pushing the material of his pants aside, he stroked his cock once.

"Come here," he murmured, gripping her hip to position himself at her aching core. "Lower yourself onto me."

Following his instructions, she rested her hands on his shoulders and took him slowly. He filled, consumed, and subdued her as she surrounded him. Jess collapsed against him as he rocked his hips against hers.

He kissed her forehead. "You may not be a virgin, but I can see I still have much to teach you." His arms encircled her as he moved within her again. "Ride me."

Jess thought back to the few times she'd ridden a horse during her youth. The two hardly compared. "How?" She bit her lip in embarrassment.

Edmund gripped her hips and guided her. "Move against me." She tested the movement, and he nodded. "That's it. There is no wrong way. Take control." He kissed her deeply as she quickened her pace. "Take your pleasure."

His whispered encouragement made her bold. Jess met his gaze and ground her hips against him, taking him deeper. His eyes narrowed as his fingers dug into her backside. She grabbed fistfuls of his jacket and rocked her hips faster. Edmund buried his face against her neck, nipping and kissing along the sensitive skin.

Their combined movements drove the need inside her to a crescendo. When his fingertips brushed against her clit, a strangled cry ripped from her throat. The pleasure she'd just experienced rushed through her body again, but even more intense than before. She

bucked against him before collapsing against his chest. Jess tightened her fists holding onto him with a desperation that left her weary. The gentle brush of his hand against her cheek brought a smile to her lips.

"I'm not finished with you yet." His voice rumbled against her ear, reverberating deep in her chest.

"You've made a wanton of me," she murmured as she glanced up into his handsome face.

He smiled, but this time the humor reached his eyes with a shimmer of firelight. "I regret nothing."

Jess stared at him. "Was that a note of teasing in your tone?"

Edmund drew her against him for a slow, intoxicating kiss. When he pulled away, Jess swayed against him, wanting more. He was still hard inside of her. She rocked against him.

"Vixen. I believe I've created a monster." With a quick shift of position, he withdrew from her and set Jess on her feet.

Before she could protest, he stood and swept her into his arms. She clutched at him, nervous butterflies descending on her insides at his sudden actions. "What are you doing?"

"Claiming you properly." He strode to the door, opening it somehow, and then carried her up the staircase.

"Someone will see us!" Jess buried her face in his jacket.

"Everyone is abed." The soft brush of his lips on her forehead caused her to glance up at him in shock. When they reached his room, he kicked the door closed and approached the bed.

The smooth silk of the comforter slid across her skin, creating an erotic friction as he lay her down. He took a step back and slowly pulled the cravat loose. His gaze never wavered from hers as he stripped every article of clothing from his body. The light of the fire highlighted his tall frame, casting his face into shadow.

Her heart pounded. Jess licked her lips as she watched him disrobe. As he revealed his bare chest, she trailed her hand across her own, grazing a nipple with her fingertips. A tingle of pleasure ricochet through her, not from her own touch, but from the look on Edmund's face when she touched herself. Sudden inspiration struck, and Jess slid her hand down over her stomach barely touching the curls at the juncture of her thighs.

A stern expression crossed Edmund's face. "Do it." He growled as she slid her fingers between her legs and across her aching center. With one smooth motion he slid his pants down and climbed onto the bed, prowling toward her like a ravenous wolf. Jess whimpered as his bare skin pressed against her thigh. She wanted to be devoured.

He covered her body and pulled her against him. Skin to skin, she arched into his warmth savoring the sensation of his body touching hers. His kiss consumed her with delirious need.

"I should punish you for teasing me," he whispered against her mouth.

"Punish me?" She arched her brow at him. "I didn't..."

He gripped her wrist and guided her hand to his shaft. "See what you do to me?"

She stroked him, reveling in the power she wielded when he groaned and pulled her closer. Edmund kissed her again, punishing and possessive, stealing her breath and leaving her body an aching mess.

"Please," she whimpered as his broke the kiss to nip at her neck.

His hand slipped between her thighs, cupping her. She moaned when he slid a finger inside her wet sheath. Jess wrapped her arms around his neck and spread her legs at the gentle nudge of his knees. Then he was there, pressing at her entrance. Edmund filled her completely in one fluid motion.

"Sweet mercy." Jess whimpered as he moved above her, inside her.

"I shall grant you no mercy, only sweet, torturous pleasure." He kissed her again, stealing her protests on his tongue. Their breaths mingled as their bodies found a rhythm that made her body sing in the delightful showers of pleasure raining upon her. He wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust into her while pressing his hips against that sensitive area she'd come to treasure. As her body approached the recognizable peak, she writhed beneath him.

"Edmund...please..." Jess gripped his back, digging her fingernails into his skin as his pace quickened. When her climax washed over her, she felt Edmund tense, his breathing ragged and his brow damp. He pulled from her body, coating her stomach with his seed, and then collapsed beside her on the bed.

They lay there, limbs intertwined, slick and sated. His hand idly stroked her hair, and she reveled in the silent caress. Still the inevitable question lingered in the back of her mind; what did this mean to him? This passionate affair. Jess glanced at him. His eyes remained closed, his breaths even and measured. Leaning closer, she pressed a soft kiss to his forehead.

"Let me get you a handkerchief." Edmund rolled from her side and handed her the linen kerchief.

"Thank you." Quickly cleaning herself, she moved to get up. "I should return to my room."

"No." He snatched her by the waist and pulled her back against him on the bed, shuffling the blankets for them to burrow beneath. "You're staying with me from now on."

From now on. What did that mean? Jess blinked up at him. His warm, naked limbs wrapped around her as he pulled her flush against his body under the sheets. She sighed, allowing him to hold her.

Although she'd never admit it to him, she didn't want to leave his side, at least not at the moment. Her joy seemed stained by the ever present truth of their circumstances.

Edmund tucked her head beneath his chin. His heartbeat echoed in her ear as his fingertips slid softly over her bare arm. Jess tried to relax, even with the cascades of emotion churning within her. She owed him a debt, but in less than a week, he'd stolen more than her freedom. He'd captured her heart. The realization made her gasp aloud.

"Something wrong?" His question rumbled through her body.

Jess shook her head. "Nothing. Just a chill."

He pulled her closer, if that was even possible. Tipping her chin up, Edmund pressed a tender kiss to her lips. It lingered, softening the doubt and melting her restraint. She slipped her hand up to cup his face. When the kiss ended, she opened her eyes and met his intense gaze.

"I'll tell you where the jewels are." Jess chewed on her lower lip awaiting his response.

"I've already located them." He kissed her again. "I shall have them by tomorrow afternoon."

"You...how?" She stared at him in awe and a pang of frustration rose within her. "So this...we..." Jess cleared her throat and sought the right words. "I'm free to leave."

"You are," he replied but refused to release her from his embrace. "If that is what you truly desire."

Jess wanted to return to her inn, her home. She sighed. But after such a grand adventure, albeit against her will at the beginning, how could she return to her simple existence in the country. She worried her lip again and allowed her gaze to drift to the door. Her mind told her to leave, but the ache in her heart begged reconsideration. Then she remembered the reason for her hesitation.

"Are you asking me to stay with you?" She glanced at him again.

"Perhaps."

"But you're a thief."

"And a lord." He grinned at her. "I thought we established this already."

"Why?" she asked. "Why steal when you have so much already within your grasp?"

"I have reasons to do what I do." His cryptic reply came from smiling lips.

"If you cannot be honest with me, then I must leave you." Jess' heart broke as she uttered the words, but ultimately, she knew deep within her heart that she could not sympathize with his secret life as a thief.

"In the morning then." He pulled her down into the blankets and held her tight. "Tonight, you still belong to me." To her surprise, he kissed her again and closed his eyes to sleep.

Jess lay there cocooned by his naked body wondering if she truly meant so little to him that he would relinquish her without even requesting an explanation or offering the truth. She squelched the tears threatening to fall and instead focused her mind on returning to the life better suited to her...one without him.

Chapter 12

Edmund pulled her closer to him as the dawn broke through the curtains. He nestled into her warmth, allowing his arousal to press against her backside. *Damn it.* He wanted her again. In fact, he wanted her in more ways and far longer than she could possibly even comprehend. Thoughts of their conversation drifted back to him. It would have been simple to convince her to stay. All he had to do was tell her the truth behind his pastime as a thief.

She moaned in her sleep and arched her back, pressing her curves against him. He brushed aside her hair and kissed her neck. Her scent intoxicated him. Try as he might, he could not bring himself to bare the truth, not in a desperate attempt to keep her by his side and in his bed. Jess mumbled his name as he suckled on the tender skin of her shoulder. When he released her, a large, red mark marred her pale skin. *Mine.*

"Edmund?" she repeated as she glanced over her shoulder at him.

He opened his mouth to speak when a knock interrupted him.

"My lord, urgent telegram from the detective." The butler's voice echoed through the wood.

"Slide it under the door, Bates." Edmund climbed from the bed and retrieved the letter. As he returned to the bed, he opened the missive and scanned the contents. His heart soared for a moment only to dive to the soles of his feet.

I found Katherine, but we're stuck in Scotland thanks to the snow. Pain in my arse. Delayed until further notice. ~ Monty.

"Bad news?" Jess asked. She'd sat up in his massive bed and clutched the blankets to her chest.

Edmund shrugged. "Quite the contrary." He moved to the nightstand and tucked the telegram into the top drawer. When he turned his attention back to her, Jess stared at him. Her hair trailed over her shoulder in a tangled mess and her makeup was smudged. Despite these things, he still found her lovely and radiant. "Have you

reconsidered my proposal?"

Jess pulled the covers closer to her chest. "I cannot until you tell me everything. Something." She twisted the sheet in her hand.

He sighed and a pang of regret hit him square in the heart. If he wanted to keep her by his side, he should tell her the truth. Since Monty had located Katherine and would ensure her continued safety, he could refocus his attention. The last six months had been hell. Her disappearance caused an uproar within the ton, shattering his own plans and personal goals.

"What are you hiding?" Jess asked as she crawled toward him. The sheet forgotten, she came closer, her curves bared to his gaze. "Tell me." She wrapped her arms around his neck and climbed onto his lap, straddling him as she had the night before.

Edmund's blood heated as his hands grasped her waist. Her lips brushed his in a soft caress. He wanted her, more than he should, more than was reasonable. The intensity of the longing frustrated him. He'd never acted so rash in his life...what was he thinking, asking a poor widow to stay with him? As his what? What role did he want her to fill? Mistress, wife, the consequences of either would prove to be his undoing. Shaking his head, he focused his wandering thoughts when she whispered against his mouth.

"Do you wish me to go?" Jess pressed a kiss to his lips.

He groaned as her fingers wove into his hair and pulled, snapping his head back. She kissed his throat. His grip on her tightened. Sweet merciful torture assaulted him as her tongue and lips wove a spell against his flesh, bathing him in heat and desperate need. He rocked his hips against her, and she shifted her position enough for him to fill her. The warmth of her body enveloped him as he slid into her.

The motion of her body as she stroked and caressed him proved to be his undoing. She would tear him apart if he allowed her to stay, stripping him layer by layer until he stood exposed to the world. Monty's words echoed in his mind. Women were nothing but a complication, a pleasant distraction. The passion between them rose again and stole the errant thoughts from his mind.

She rode him until her movements became frenzied, then he pushed her down onto her back and drove into her over and over until she screamed his name with wild abandon. He gripped her beneath him. When his body cried for release, he gave in, allowing the bliss to pull him down into a pool of warm pleasure. He rolled to the side and pulled her against him.

Edmund stroked her hair gently. When her breathing slowed betraying her sleeping state, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Slipping quietly from the peaceful cocoon of her embrace, he

dressed and scrawled a note. Edmund set it on the pillow and retreated to his study. Bates arrived without being summoned, his presence ensuring the course of action he must take.

"I need you to escort her home." He cleared his throat as he wrote a draft note from the bank. "Take this to ensure her safe return. Any remaining funds are to be given to her upon her arrival at the inn."

Bates took the draft and tucked it into his pocket without even a glance. He met Edmund's gaze directly.

"You have something to say, Bates?"

"I do, my lord."

Edmund tossed the pen down and steepled his fingers as he leaned back in the chair. "Then speak your mind."

"I have served you well, have I not?"

"You have."

"In all my years of service, I have never challenged your decisions."

"No, you have not." Edmund arched his brow. "But I can sense your tension. Out with it."

"I beg you to reconsider." Bates held his gaze, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Do not send her away."

"Why in the devil not?" Edmund had never seen Bates quite as determined. "I have no use for her any longer. Send her home."

"You have no problem treating her as a common whore?" Bates asked, his expression shifting into fury. He straightened himself quickly and nodded. "I apologize for my outburst, my lord, but your actions are appalling."

"When I need your opinion, Bates, I shall ask for it." He tapped his fingers together. "You shall take the train and be back by tomorrow evening. Have I made my wishes clear?"

"Yes, my lord." Proffering a crisp bow, Bates turned and strode from the room.

Edmund turned his attention to the papers on his desk. Once Katherine returned, he could finally marry her off as he'd intended.

The soft echo of the front door knocker filtered into the study. After a few moments, Bates returned holding another telegram. He took it and the butler retreated again. Opening the note, he read the brief lines.

In London. Complications arose. Will call on you this afternoon. ~ Simon.

He tossed the telegram down onto the desk and ran his hand over his face. "What now?"



The trip to the inn proved quick and uneventful. Jess had spent most of the time staring out the window watching the snow laden landscape pass by. At the station, Bates had taken her bag and followed her to her modest inn. She stared up at the simple structure. It certainly wasn't as grand as Edmund's town home, but it belonged to her.

Her heart ached at the thought of him. He'd made love to her, then left her without so much as a goodbye. The note was seared into her mind. *Forget me.* Those simple words crushed her.

Anna had stared, her eyes filled with concern and regret as she helped Jess dress. Bates had told her Edmund left shortly after rising that morning and had left him explicit instructions to return her to her home. Jess had never felt so used, so worthless, in her entire life. When she read the telegram Edmund had tucked into the nightstand, it made sense. There was another woman. She swiped a hand across her cheeks to hide the tears that spilled. *What a fool I've been.*

Swallowing the shame and tears, Jess opened the door and entered the inn. "Judy, I'm back." She pasted on a smile as she entered the common room and searched for her sister's smiling face.

"Oh, ma'am, you've returned!" Andrew rushed from the kitchen. "I've done my best, but it's not easy, not at all." He blustered on, wiping his hands on the apron tied around his waist.

"Andrew, why are you in the kitchen? Where's Judy?" She glanced around the room again. "What is going on around here?"

"That man...the one who was left here with Miss Judy. Well, he took her to London a few days ago. I've been doing my best here, but I'm afraid my cooking isn't quite as good as yours and Miss Judy's. I brought my ma in to help a bit until you came back. I hope that's alright with you." The rush of words from Andrew's mouth left Jess staggering.

"Wait, he took her?" Jess shook her head as the fury with Edmund rose to a peak. "When?"

"Two days ago. Judy had given me instructions and told me to wait here for you both to return." Andrew frowned. "She's not with you?"

"No, she is not." Jess ground her teeth together and turned to Bates. "I need you to send a telegram for me." At his nod, she spoke clearly. "Tell that cold-hearted thief I want my sister returned, unharmed, post haste."

"Yes, my lady." Bates turned to go but she called out to him again.

"I'll have dinner waiting for you when you return, Bates."

He nodded and left the inn.

"If I ever see that bastard again, I'm going kill him." Jess threw a glass across the room, satisfaction washing over her as it shattered against the hearth.

Chapter 13

Edmund poured a glass of whisky and sighed. The house stood silent as he'd dismissed the servants for the remainder of the day. Alone for the first time in weeks, he moved to his chair by the fireplace. He'd watched from the park across the street as Bates and Jess left in a hired coach. Part of him wanted to go to her, drag her upstairs, and keep her there indefinitely. As the carriage pulled away from the curb, his heart ached at the knowledge she was no longer his. The ache lingered even now.

"This is ridiculous." He shook his head at the pang of regret encircling his heart. "I've no use for her now. Women are nothing but a hindrance." Edmund sipped his whisky.

"I wholeheartedly agree."

The sound of a familiar voice echoing behind him made Edmund choke on his drink. He wiped his mouth and turned. Simon stood leaning against the doorframe.

"Don't you know how to knock?" Edmund stood, moving to refill his glass.

"Since when do we stand on ceremony with each other?" Simon asked as he crossed the room. "I came in the back door. No one saw me."

Edmund poured a second glass and handed it to his friend. "Well, you didn't come for a social call. The telegram mentioned complications." He leaned against the desk and narrowed his gaze at Simon. "Care to elaborate?"

Simon swirled the liquid in the glass. "I brought the sister to London. Isaac and Thomas weren't at the station waiting for me per my instructions. When I went to hail a coach, she disappeared in the crowd."

"You brought the sister to London and then lost her?" Edmund raked his hand through his hair. Jess would be infuriated when she discovered her sister's disappearance. He pushed the thought aside

and scowled at Simon. "What does this have to do with the mission I left in your capable hands?"

"The jewels are gone." Simon drained the remaining liquor.

"What the hell do you mean 'gone'?" Edmund snapped as he slammed the glass down and ran his hand through his hair. "I gave you simple instructions, Simon. Damn it! How did you manage to fuck this up?"

Simon glanced up, his expression calm and passive. He arched a brow. "The jewels were in my jacket pocket." He shrugged. "I can only assume she stole them before she disappeared."

Edmund stared at his friend and laughed in disbelief. Could it be possible for these sisters to be that much alike? "I don't even want to know how it's possible for a slip of a woman to snatch something from your pocket and not have you notice. And you call yourself a mob lord. This farce has played out long enough. Find her and my jewels."

"I've searched the station, and the boys are out making inquiries as we speak." Simon glanced around the room unfazed by Edmund's commanding tone.

"You don't sound overly concerned about the situation." Edmund crossed his arms.

"I have my best men working on the problem." Simon smirked in a rare show of emotion. "You shall have your jewels within the week."

"And the girl?" Edmund asked, testing the still waters of Simon's cool demeanor. He'd known Simon since they were children. The uncharacteristic lapses in the carefully crafted calm shrouding Simon made him curious, but not concerned...yet.

"She shall be retrieved and dealt with accordingly." Simon reached past him and grabbed the decanter.

"Return her."

Simon's head snapped up his cold gaze fixing on Edmund's. "She is my problem, and I will deal with her." He poured more whisky and took a sip. "You've made a pet of her sister, have you not? Keeping her in lieu of the jewels."

Edmund snatched the decanter from his friend's hand. "I sent her home."

A choked sound emanated from Simon as he sputtered mid-swallow. He recovered quickly and turned toward Edmund, his eyes wide. "Why in the devil would you free her? She knows too much. What if she—"

"Since she is still under the impression she will be linked to us should she expose our theft, she will say nothing of transpired events," Edmund replied with a shrug.

"What have you told her of us?"

"Nothing."

Simon's silent judgment unnerved him. It was no wonder he was considered the most intimidating mob leader in all the London underground. Fortunately, the history of their friendship extended farther than their current roles.

"You tupp her." Simon's words broke the stillness of the room.

"She belonged to me." Edmund faced Simon. "She served her purpose. I returned her. Simple as that."

"Life is never that simple, Edmund. You of all people should know that." The two men locked gazes. "Trying to sell your sister for political advantage was low, even for you. Her disappearance is on your conscience."

Edmund slammed his fist on the desk. "Enough!" Even as he shouted, the accusation hung in the air between them. Simon caught him off guard with the painful truth. He'd treated his sister like a commodity, and her fate hung over his head like a dark cloud.

"Katherine would be ashamed to see you treating a woman like chattel, then throwing her away like a worthless bauble." Simon pushed harder.

"You're dangerously close to—"

"To what? Hit me if you must." He shook his head at Edmund. "As if it will soothe your guilty conscience."

Edmund threw his glass into the fireplace, savoring the sound of shattering glass. After a few tense moments, he spoke. "Monty found her in Scotland."

"Katherine is in Scotland?" Simon asked surprise in his voice.

With a nod, Edmund straightened and brushed his sleeves off. "They've been delayed by the snow."

A knock at the front door drifted into the study. Edmund answered the door. A messenger handed him a telegram. He tipped the lad and returned to the study.

"What does it say?" Simon asked. "Monty?"

Edmund tore open the seal and scanned the contents of the message. He glanced up at Simon. "No. But you may want to hasten the return of your missing woman. It seems her sister is displeased with the turn of events."

Simon nodded and moved toward the rack in the hall to collect his coat, gloves, and hat. Pulling them on, he turned to Edmund. "I'll send a message to the inn when I've located both her and the jewels." With a nod, his friend left via the servant's door at the back of the house.

The years of companionship put them of a similar mind. Simon would find the girl and return her. Until then, he had to pacify the hot tempered innkeeper. He groaned at the memory of her silky skin against his as he buried himself inside of her. Perhaps his decision to send her away had been made in haste. The thought of her made his

blood surge straight to his groin. After a quick trip to the stables and the local modiste, he would make his way north in hopes of distracting the widow until her sister could be restored. Unless she decided to kill him first.

Chapter 14

Brushing the flour off her hands, Jess turned to the older woman who helped her in the kitchen. "Would you mind checking the bread in the oven?"

With a nod the woman did as Jess asked. Andrew's mother, Marie, proved to be a diligent and reliable worker. She would consider taking her on full time, but Jess and Judy worked well enough together that they didn't require any additional help in the inn. Thoughts of her missing sister made her heart sink.

They had a few travelers stop for the evening. She'd busied herself with menial tasks around the inn to keep the ache and hurt at bay. Judy's disappearance was a direct result of Edmund's orders. She knew it deep in her bones.

Jess plopped the ladle into the pot of stew, splashing herself with hot broth. She groaned. The man had ruined her by allowing her to glimpse the glamour of the privileged class. She had been content in her ignorance, but that was before...Jess shoved the thoughts away. "I will not dwell on it," she mumbled to herself.

"Would you like me to serve the guests, mum?" Marie asked as she loaded the tray with bowls of stew and fresh bread.

"Yes, thank you." Jess turned away to hide the hurt in her eyes. When Marie left the kitchen, the weight of it all became too much to bear. *He used and then dismissed you.* The ache in her heart spread to her head. She leaned against the counter.

"Are you well, my lady?" The concerned question shattered her solitude.

She straightened wiping at her eyes before turning toward the voice. Bates stood at attention, his gaze alert and understanding. "I am perfectly fine, Bates. Is there anything else I can get for you?" Jess offered him a half-hearted smile.

He came closer, searching her face for something. She took an involuntary step back. "Is this what you want?" he asked as he

gestured to the inn surrounding them.

"It's my home." Jess chewed on her lower lip for a second. "It belongs to me, so yes, this is where I need to be."

"That's not what I asked." Bates cocked his head.

Jess pursed her lips. She knew what he was asking. "Did your master put you up to this?" She crossed her arms. "Is this some twisted game he likes to play?" The pain of rejection welled in her chest again, and the tears threatened to spill once more.

Bates took a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. "My lord has not given me leave to speak of these matters. I do this of my own free will."

She took the cloth and dabbed her eyes. "Why, Bates?" *Why can he not tell me the truth? Why would he ask me to stay and in the next breath dismiss me? Why does ice run in Winterbourne's veins?* The silent questions raged inside her mind. But she let the butler draw his own conclusions.

"The short amount of time you resided with us was the most contented I'd seen my master since Miss Katherine disappeared." He clasped his hands behind his back.

"Katherine?" Jess murmured the name. The woman mentioned in the telegram. The same name Anne had used before the masquerade ball when talking about how well the gown looked on her. Jess crushed the handkerchief in her fist as she leveled her gaze at Bates. "Who is Katherine?"

The butler swallowed, but his impassive expression never shifted. He looked a bit uncomfortable. "My lord has his reasons for not imparting that information." He bowed. "Forgive me, my lady. It was merely my wish that you understand while my master is direct in his speech, he often lacks the ability to convey his thoughts in a suitable manner."

Her thoughts lingered on what he just said. Edmund knew what he wanted and demanded it, however his communication skills were severely lacking. At least on that point her and Bates agreed. "Tell me who she is." Jess pushed him. "Please. You know exactly what he's withholding, and yet you deny me."

"I beg your pardon, my lady, I have already spoken out of turn." Bates bowed and turned to leave. He glanced over his shoulder. "He may seem cold and heartless, but he's not made of stone. Deep in your soul, you know this to be true."

Before she could speak, Bates left the kitchen. She pushed the rolling pin on the table as a sudden weariness washed over her. Maria returned as Jess untied the apron and pulled it over her head.

"I'm sorry, suddenly I don't feel well. Would you mind finishing up?" Jess hung the apron up and walked past Maria.

"Of course, my dear. Andrew can help me. There are only a few patrons left. I'll see that everything is tidied up before I leave for the evening." Her warm smile comforted Jess. How lucky she was to have their help.

Jess thought of her sister as she pushed open the door to her room. After closing it behind her, she leaned against the solid wood. What had that brute done to her? She struggled to remember the man Edmund had left with her sister. The quiet one she had called him. Panic clawed at the inside of her chest. She needed answers when nothing but questions abounded.

Stumbling toward the bed, she collapsed on it and buried her face in the pillow. The sheets weren't as soft as Edmund's. She shook her head. *Stop thinking about him. Stop it!* The man who had caused her nothing but distress since he walked through her front door a week ago. Had it really only been a week? One week to break a country widow. Jess closed her eyes. Her head pounded, and the worry dug into her heart like a parasite.

A soft click echoed as the door opened. Jess waved her hand. "I'm fine, Maria." The door clicked closed, and she relaxed again.

"You're far too trusting."

Edmund. His voice echoed in her head. Her eyes shot open. For a brief moment, she thought she'd heard him speak. The fire crackled in the small stove. Surely she must be mistaken. The bed springs squeaked as someone sat on the bed next to her feet. Jess bolted upright, turning in time to catch the look of amusement on Edmund's face.

"What in the blazes are you doing here?" Jess pressed her hands to her cheeks. His calm demeanor belied the heat burning in his eyes.

"I received your telegram."

"It was not a summons for you. I demanded my sister be returned." Jess glanced at the door. "Have you restored her?"

Edmund cocked his head. A small smile played on his lips. "She is in capable hands."

"Your henchman still has her then?"

"Rest assured, Simon will not allow any harm to come to her." He rested his hand on her leg, his fingertips brushing the stocking clad skin exposed just above her boot.

"Why are you here, Edmund?" Jess jerked her legs away from him. "You haven't come all this way just to deliver that message."

He arched his brow and stood. "Your debt remains unpaid. I came to reclaim what belongs to me."

Jess shot to her feet. "I have done everything you asked of me. You got your jewels. I want my sister returned, and then I demand you leave us in peace."

Quicker than lightning, he grasped her wrist and pulled her against him. "Why would I do that?"

"You sent me away. It was you who told me to forget whatever happened last night." Her throat constricted as the tears threatened again. She pounded her free hand against his chest. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"I changed my mind."

As if his simple explanation would soothe the fractures in her heart. She met his gaze, defiant and proud. "I belong to no one. You've made your choice, now leave me." Jess tried to pull her hand from his grasp, but he tightened his grip and held her firm against him. She clutched the lapel of his jacket, half in desperation and half in anger.

"No."

"Damn it, Winterbourne, I am not subject to your whims and demands." She gasped as his lips came down on hers. Her irate words dissolved on his tongue. Rage and passion burned inside of her. She'd missed his touch, his kiss, the heat in his embrace, but her anger consumed the desire in one bite as her teeth dug into his flesh and the taste of blood filled her mouth.

He reared back and pressed his hand to his mouth. "Fuck." Glancing at the blood on his fingers, he met her gaze. "Jessamine, you are playing a dangerous game."

"As are you." She refused to back down. Her eyes followed his tongue as it brushed over his bite-swollen lip.

"Never in my life have I chased after a woman." He gripped both her wrists in his hands and took a step toward her. She backed away until she collided with the wall, her heart pounding beneath her breast. He pressed his body against hers and pinned her wrists to the wall above her head. Edmund leaned close, his scent overwhelming her as he pressed his lips to her throat. "Never have I wanted a woman as I want you."

The scrape of his teeth against her tender skin made her whimper. "Edmund..." He kissed her neck, and the pulse of pleasure mixed with pain radiated through her body. When he pulled away, his eyes flickered with unfiltered lust. Jess licked her lips.

"This marks you as mine."

"Stop." Jess murmured. "I cannot play these games. Please."

Edmund dropped his hands and stepped back. His gaze remained fixed on her, his expression filled with barely restrained need. He clenched his hands into fists and then released.

Desire coursed through her, screaming for his touch. Jess ignored the turmoil within her and tilted her chin up as she spoke. "Who is Katherine?"

Edmund raked his hand across his face and nodded. "Of course."

Shaking his head, he turned away from her and leaned his hand against the wall.

Jess stared at his broad back. Trepidation nagged at her. She kicked it away. "If there is to be anything further between us, you need to tell me the truth."

With a sigh, he turned back to her. "If I tell you, then you become mine, permanently." A sudden jolt of uncertainty shook her. His handsome face betrayed nothing as he closed the gap between them. "Do we have an accord?"

Her heart pounded. The air stilled as he came closer, his lips hovering over hers. Jess could only stare at him. Her freedom as a widow would vanish with a simple word. But would she be satisfied with such a life after glimpsing the world beyond? The words swirling around in her brain dissipated before they reached her mouth. His breath brushed across her lips. The lure of Edmund, of the promises etched in every caress called to her.

"I want to know everything, Edmund." Jess' breath caught in her throat as his hand settled on her waist. "There can be no secrets between us."

Edmund brushed his lips against hers, the warmth fleeting, and yet she swayed against him wanting more. "Say the words," he whispered.

"I belong to you." Jess watched the transformation in his eyes as they softened. In relief?

He leaned his forehead against hers, their noses brushing, breaths mingling. After a long moment, he spoke. "Katherine is my sister."

"Your sister!" She could barely contain her surprise, and he winced against the pitch of her exclamation. "I'm sorry...I didn't..." A tender kiss silenced her. He broke away and met her gaze. All the questions she'd had started to fall into place, the clothing, the maid, all of it. "What happened?"

He ran a hand through his hair, mussing it. A lock fell across his forehead. "She disappeared six months ago. Simon and Monty have been helping me track her."

"The telegram." Jess remembered the missive from the night before. "He's found her though, hasn't he?" Jess clutched at his jacket in hope of good news even though she'd never met his sister.

With a nod, he stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingertips. "It's in your nature to feel compassion for those around you, isn't it?"

"I was raised with a conscience." Jess teased him when a thought struck. "The jewels then?"

"They belong to me. Family heirlooms. My sister was wearing them the night she vanished." He smiled. "Am I still a thief?"

"Technically, yes." Her eyes widened. "What of my sister? You promised me the truth, remember?"

"I did." His fingers tipped her chin up and caressed her sensitive throat. "Your sister is in Simon's possession. He will have her returned soon."

Jess narrowed her gaze at him. "If that were true, you could have had her returned by now."

Edmund sighed. "She disappeared at the station, lost in the crowd." He pressed a finger to her lips before she could reply. "But I trust Simon implicitly. She will be returned unharmed, you have my word."

She nodded conceding to his words. "You put a lot of faith in that man. Why?"

"I've known Simon since we were children."

"Is he a lord as well?"

"In a manner of speaking," Edmund replied with a teasing smile on his lips. "Now, I've answered your questions." He kissed her, soft and sweet on the mouth. "Be a good girl and open the bag."

She glanced down at the satchel that lay on the floor half under her bed where he pointed. When had he dropped that? Jess turned to him to protest when he swept his hand along her gown, unfastening the buttons along the front of her gown.

"I want you to wear it for me." He finished unfastening the gown and stepped away. "Put it on." Edmund sat down on the bed, loosening his cravat.

Jess pulled the dress off with a steady hand, her senses heightened at the knowledge of his attention on her alone. She dropped the homespun gown onto the floor and picked up the leather satchel. Withdrawing her hand, she found it clenched around a mass of black lace.

"There's more." Edmund's voice remained calm, but the hunger in his eyes emboldened her.

She laid the lace on the bed and searched the bag again. A silk lined corset lay at the bottom of the satchel. Jess placed it next to the lace and set the bag aside. "You want me to wear *this*?" she asked as she picked up the lace again, examining it closely. "Drawers?" Jess glanced at him as the heat stole across her cheeks. "I'm not even going to ask where you found such...impractical undergarments."

A wolfish grin appeared on his lips. Jess sucked in a breath. Edmund was handsome, but when he smiled in such a way, he transformed beyond that into something regal and irresistible. "You'll soon discover things that seem the most impractical can often be the most enticing."

Her fingers brushed the rough cotton of her own chemise. The thinning garment had served her well, but under Edmund's scrutiny she realized how ill-suited she was to him. The reality of their stations slammed into her with the force of a mule's kick. Jess crossed her

arms and backed away from the flimsy garments. When she met his heated gaze, she faltered.

"What's wrong?" he asked as if sensing her hesitation.

"I'm sensible, frugal, and conservative." Jess shook her head. "I'm no lady, merely a simple innkeeper's widow, the daughter of a farmer." Saying the words aloud made their implication more tangible. She turned her back to him as the reality stabbed her heart.

His heat surrounded her as his arms slid around her waist, and he pulled her against his broad chest. "If I cared about your bloodline, I would never have claimed you." Edmund pressed a soft kiss against her cheek. "You belong to me, Jessamine."

"Edmund," she whispered as he gathered fistfuls of her chemise in his hands and pulled the fabric over her head. Tossing the garment behind him, he then turned his attention to her bare chest. His hands cupped her breasts as his fingertips teased her nipples. She swayed back against him, her head dropping back against his chest.

"Perhaps I should only make you wear the bloomers." He slid his hand across the curve of her stomach and dipped beneath the fabric of her drawers. His fingertips brushed the curls at the juncture of her thighs. "Or nothing at all. I like having you bared to me." Edmund pushed her drawers down and turned her to face the wall.

Jess whimpered. Every caress sparked a desperate need deep inside her. She wanted to spin in his arms and bury her hands in his hair, kiss his wicked mouth.

"Put your hands on the wall." He positioned them to his liking then turned his attention to her legs. Slipping a hand between her thighs without touching her core, he nudged them apart. The soft brush of his fingertips trailed over her thigh and hip, along her side, and across her breasts.

Jess shivered knowing she grew more aroused with every second of his prolonged seduction. "Must you torture me?" she asked, her voice pleading. The warm press of his kiss against her bare shoulder made her legs tremble.

"You call this torture." He chuckled, his breath sending delightful shivers along her spine. He thrust his hand into her hair and tipped her head back to nibble on her neck. "This is reverence." His other hand came to rest on her hip and pulled her against his arousal. "I will worship you until the sun rises." Edmund released her for a moment, but in the next breath, he slid between her thighs, pushing against her opening.

With a gasp, Jess arched her back, urging him on. In one motion, he buried himself inside her, his hands grasping her hips. She moaned as he moved, the rhythm increasing the ache for release. He pushed his body against hers, and she took what he gave, savoring it.

Desperate for more, she met every thrust and her body begged for the pleasure his actions promised. When his fingertips brushed against her clit, she sobbed and bucked against him. He stroked the sensitive spot as he made love to her. The pant of his breath across her skin and the graze of his teeth as he peppered kisses along her spine pushed her over the edge. Jess tumbled headfirst into bliss, allowing the pleasure to claim her. Her knees buckled, but he caught her around the waist and carried her to the bed. Her vision blurred by the waning pleasure, she sank into the mattress as he climbed on top of her.

"I'm not finished with you yet, *mon amour*." Edmund captured her lips in a kiss that left her breathless. He slid into her again, slowly building the delicious sensations to a crescendo.

When she came again, the pleasure pulsed through her like a wave crashing on the shore. He took his own release filling her completely. Pressing his forehead to hers, he whispered, "Mine," and stole a soft, warm kiss full of promise.

Edmund stroked the bare skin of her arm as they nestled together on the bed. Jess glanced down at their legs and laughed.

"What do you find amusing?" he asked.

"You're still fully clothed, and I've still got stockings and boots on." Jess buried her face in his chest as the laughter took control of her. "We must look ridiculous."

He laughed, and she glanced up at him, surprised by his reaction. His gaze shifted to hers. "What?"

"I don't think I've ever heard you laugh." She stared at him in awe.

"Not many people have." Edmund kissed her nose. His lips slid lower, taking hers in a languid, toe-curling kiss that seemed to go on and on. When he pulled away, his expression took on a serious tone. "Come to London with me." His hold tightened.

"As your mistress?" Jess asked with a chuckle.

"As my countess." His eyes reflected nothing but sincerity. "You belong to me. I would have you by my side."

"People will talk. I'm not from a noble—"

Edmund silenced her with a kiss. "I care very little for their opinions, and I've told you before I don't need a noble wife. I only need one I can trust." He cupped her face with his hand. "Well?"

Jess blinked back the tears in her eyes. "You trust me?"

"Implicitly."

"Then why did you not tell me the truth sooner?" She bit her lip, knowing she shouldn't ask such a ridiculous question and ruin his mood.

"I didn't want you to come to harm." He sighed. "My life is not uncomplicated. There are those who seek to do me harm and steal what is most valuable to me. I did not wish that fate for you."

"And now?" she asked eager for his response.

"You've proven yourself to be strong and capable. It will be easier to protect you under my own roof and with my name." He frowned. "Although, I anticipate trouble at times. You must obey me without hesitation."

Jess thought for a moment and nodded. "I refuse to take orders that go against my better judgment."

He pushed her down on the bed, pinning her arms to the mattress. "Stubborn woman." His punishing kiss silenced her. "I see I'll have to take measures to train you then."

"Train me?" Her eyes flew wide. "I'm not your horse or a hound."

"You're right, both my horse and my dogs listen better than you do."

"Well, I..." She fell quiet as his tongue halted hers again. When he released her, Jess sighed in frustration. "Is that your solution to everything?"

"Kissing you?" Edmund asked with a grin. "Yes."

"You know I dislike you immensely." Jess poked a finger in his chest.

"The feeling is mutual." He kissed her forehead. "We shall stay here until I have word from Simon and Monty."

"Ah yes, the plot gets thicker." Jess nodded. "Are Simon and Monty friends of yours then?"

"Yes, but we are more business partners," Edmund replied.

"What kind of business are they in?" Jess asked as she glanced up at him.

"Simon is a mob leader, and Monty is a detective for Scotland Yard."

Jess bolted upright and stared at him. "You're joking, right?"

"I'm afraid not." His charming grin reappeared on his sinful lips.

Edmund's smile did nothing to ease her conscience. "Sweet merciful saints. Why couldn't the three of you just have been petty thieves like I'd assumed the night you came into my inn?"

"We are thieves, my dear." He stole a quick kiss, surprising Jess once again. "But everyone has secrets. Even you."

"Me?" Jess laughed. "You must be mistaking me with someone else."

"Oh sweet Jess," he said as he reached out to palm her breast. "You're much more interesting than you care to admit." He leaned forward and suckled on her nipple. Pleasure coursed through her, making her want him again.

"You are a wicked man, you know that?" She moaned as he lavished the other breast with the same attention.

"I know everything." Edmund pulled her atop him. "Now kiss me,

or I shall be forced to teach you what other uses I have for your pretty mouth, wife."

End Book One

Special Content: First Chapter from At Winter's Demand

Judith stood in the doorway of the inn staring at the carriage rolling through the snow. Dumbfounded, she glanced at the man who stood where the carriage had just been. The absurdity of the last day left her head spinning. A trio of men showed up at her sister's inn the night before. Come the morning her sister claimed one of them to be her husband!

The events made even less sense as the day progressed. Something didn't feel right. These men and her sister's strange behavior. She watched, helpless, as the ornate carriage faded into the distance carrying Jess to God knew where.

"Where is your *friend* taking my sister?" she shouted at the man when he turned to face her.

His shoes crunched in the fresh snow as he stalked the distance between them. The closer he came, the more his image sharpened. If she hadn't been so irate over the whole mess, she would have taken his expression as a warning.

His eyes narrowed as his lips thinned with obvious displeasure. With each determined step he took, Judith beat down the sudden urge to run inside and hide. There was no mistaking him for a lackey. The man oozed intimidation. He pushed past her without a word as he entered the kitchen.

"Hey, I'm talking to you." Judith closed the door and spun on him. She eyed the broad expanse of his back. "Arrogant horse's arse," she grumbled, following him.

The man stood in the center of the room. His gaze moved over every surface as if searching for something. He turned slowly in a circle. When his gaze finally landed on her, he moved on to the parlor without even blinking.

Judith walked to the front door and locked it. She'd had enough of this stranger ignoring her as if she were a speck of dust in the corner. She leaned against the door and dropped the key in the top of her bodice. Without even glancing at him, she walked past the silent man on her way to the kitchen.

Judith turned the key in the lock, securing the back door as well, and deposited the second key with the first. She'd have answers, or there'd be hell to pay.

The stew simmered on the stove. She ladled a bowl full and put it on a tray. After adding a small loaf of bread, she picked up the meal and carried it to the parlor. The man walked around the room, his

hand gliding over the wooden walls. Judith sat down and began to eat as she watched his movements.

"I cannot think of what you could possibly be searching for." Judith took another bite. "Perhaps if you ask nicely, I may be able to help you."

He moved around the room as if he was the only person in existence.

Judith sighed and ate while she watched him. Had the man provided at least a reason for her sister's hasty departure, she might have been able to forgive his rude behavior. However, he refused to acknowledge her presence. That irritated her more than anything else did. Short of a physical confrontation, Judith could come up with no other means of gaining information from the singularly infuriating man.

"Do you even know how to speak?" Judith asked as she wiped the bottom of the bowl with the last of the bread and popped it into her mouth.

He glared at her over his shoulder and then resumed his methodical search of every stone around the hearth. His cold assessment made her shiver. She picked up the tray and returned to the kitchen, eager to get a moment away from him. Something about the man shook her confidence down to its very core. *What could he possibly be searching for?*

Judith allowed her thoughts to stray to her sister's actions earlier in the day. The handsome rogue she claimed to be her husband stalked much of her movements. She had found it curious, but at her sister's request, she'd remained silent. Damn him for stealing her away. Now she might never know what had transpired between them. Answers seemed as elusive as any chance of verbal discourse with the stoic man in the next room.

As she washed the handful of dishes, Judith lost herself in thought. When the door to the kitchen swung open, she jumped and spun around, nearly dropping the bowl in her hand. She pressed a soapy hand to her chest to still her fluttering heart and glanced up.

The silent stranger stood in the center of the room, his gaze slowly moving along the walls. It slid past her without hesitation. Judith frowned.

"You're about to drive me bloody insane," she said through gritted teeth before turning back to her task. She finished the rest of the dishes, dried them, and put them away.

He never wavered from his task. When she passed him to put the pot on the shelf, his gaze fell on her for a brief moment. Before she could even discern the color of his eyes, he turned his back to her.

"Bloody knob," Judith swore as she passed him again. His scent of

leather mingling with notes of tobacco and vanilla blended with the familiar aroma of baked bread. Stopping behind him, she suppressed the urge to bury her face in his coat. Her eyes drifted closed, and she inhaled, drawing the scents deep, letting them linger.

When she opened her eyes, a pair of smoky hazel eyes stared at her. The faint shadow of a beard highlighted his jaw. His sharp features accentuated by the way his black hair slicked back into a queue.

"Fetch me some of that stew."

Judith blinked twice, unsure if she heard him correctly or not.

"You can talk. Saints above, would it hurt you to polish your manners?" She pushed past him and reached for the ladle. Her hand hovered over the spoon, and then she dropped it to her side to hide the tremor. Her heart hammered in her chest as she turned back to him and met his cool expression with a scowl.

Judith propped her hands on her hips. "Tell me where my sister is first. You can at least do that much. I deserve to know where she is and if she's even safe..." The words died on her lips as he reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a dangerous looking silver pistol.

"The stew, and bread too." He leveled the barrel at her and cocked the hammer.

Judith swallowed the scream clawing at the back of her throat. With a nod, she ladled the stew into a large bowl and cut a loaf of bread in half. The knife nearly slipped from her grip. She pinched her eyes closed for a moment, refusing to look up and see the hollow barrel pointed at her head. Once she set the meal on the counter before her, she backed away without a word and wiped her hands on her apron in an attempt to hide their trembling.

He uncocked the revolver and slid it back beneath his coat. Without another word, he picked up the food and retreated into the parlor.

When the door swung shut, Judith dropped boneless to the floor. Her heart hammered in her chest as her hands shook.

A gun! He pointed a gun at me. She buried her face in her hands and felt the hot tears against her palms.

"Jess, what the hell have you done to me?"

Kirsten S. Blacketer

Stick her in the middle of a chaotic home with two children, a hyperactive dog, and a camouflage-wearing husband, and she can cook and clean with the best of them. But when the sun goes down and the children are nestled in bed fast asleep, she tucks away her pots and broom and like Cinderella she transforms.

Her characters creep forth from the dark recesses of her mind taking their places in the castles and forests built from her words. No simpering heroines linger there with forlorn gazes turned to the horizon, waiting for their Prince Charming. They straighten their spine, arming themselves with blade and bow, prepared to do their part in defense of their honor and destiny. She breathes life into the women she believes our ancestors to be, showing how they lived and loved with passion and grace.

Never bored by the tales still left to tell, she battles the ever sarcastic-muse in her quest for romance.

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Connected by a Kiss book 3

Dawn Brower

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Foreword

The shooting star awaits a wish
It's alluring and quite roguish
The flame is hot, as hot as fire
In the dark, rife with desire
Close your eyes, wish for bliss
And experience a scoundrel's kiss...

Prologue

A fire blazed in the hearth and along with several sconces of candles kept the room aglow. The window was glazed over with ice, as little Lady Juliette Brooks stared outside. The velvet black sky sparkled with stars twinkling down with heavenly light. A luminous streak filled the sky as a star shot across the darkness. Lady Juliette's heart beat heavily in her chest. This was her chance to make the wish she'd been carrying inside of her for so long. There was only one thing her nine year old heart desired more than anything in the world. It was to always have her best friend by her side. She couldn't imagine a life where he was no longer in it.

"What is so interesting?"

Juliette turned and met Lord Grayson Abbot's, the future Duke of Kissinger's, gaze. Her family estate bordered Kissinger Castle the ducal estate. Her father was the Earl of Riverdale. Every Christmastide their families came together to celebrate. Not that Grayson and Juliette ever needed a reason to spend time together. As long as she remembered he'd always been by her side. He was as patient, kind, and loyal as a twelve year old boy could be. She imagined he'd grow up to be the hero every girl swooned over.

"I made a wish on a shooting star," Juliette said.

Grayson peeked over her shoulder and stared at the night sky. "I don't see anything."

"Don't be silly," she retorted. "Shooting stars dissolve as fast as they make an appearance. I'm sure my wish sent it on its way."

Grayson stood behind her his gaze focused on the darkness outside the window. Juliette wasn't used to his silence—it was almost crushing, and unbearable to withstand. After a moment he stepped back and put some distance between them. Something was wrong—horribly so. He was distancing himself from her. What had she done?

"What did you wish for?"

Finally he spoke to her, but it didn't ease her concern. He held

himself stiff and distant. She didn't like this side of him. What happened to the friend who was always willing to have fun and play silly games with her? She missed that Grayson and wanted him back. This boy in front of her was almost a stranger.

"I can't tell you or it won't come true."

He tilted his head and a stray lock of his dark hair fell over his forehead. He sighed. His blue eyes were almost as glacial as the ice outside. "I hate to break your heart," he said with feigned concern. "But you should know wishes never come true. They're a falsehood best left to story books."

"They are not," Juliette exclaimed. "Why are you being so mean?"

This was not her Grayson. Her friend would never be so cruel. What had happened since she'd last seen him? It had been less than a sennight. She'd found him at the pond separating their estate. He'd been sitting on the frozen water and staring down at it as if he expected to find the answers to all his questions. He'd been quiet then, but not like this.

"I've coddled you long enough don't you think?" He crossed his arms across his chest. "I'm growing up and you're a silly little girl."

Juliette's bottom lip stuck out as a full on pout formed. Tears pooled at the corner of her eyes. Big droplets fell down her cheeks. What had she done to make him act thusly? She lifted her hand and wiped away the wetness from her face. If he was going to be a surly brutish nitwit than she had better things to do with her time—and being called a silly little girl didn't top her list. "It is sad when I think about it," she replied.

"What is?" he asked.

"That I was foolish enough to waste my wish on you." She stomped away from him and left him to stare out the window. A friend that belittled you was no friend indeed, and Juliette didn't need one who'd do something so dastardly.



Grayson Abbot stared at the entrance of the sitting room. He should go after her and explain why he was being so churlish. It wasn't her fault he had to go away. He wanted to make sure she was able to make it on her own. He wouldn't be around much longer to protect her. Soon he'd be at Eton and would only see her on holidays. Father had informed him of the plan a sennight ago. He should have

expected it. All young lords either went to Harrow or Eton to start their education. A tutor could only do so much to ensure an heir was properly taught. Grayson already devoured every book his tutor had put in front of him. He thirsted for more knowledge, but he hadn't realized what that desire would lead to. He'd have to leave Juliette behind, and there wasn't a thing he could do to change that. She'd been his only friend for so long he couldn't imagine a day where he'd not be able to see her.

He should apologize, and yet he stayed still as if frozen in place.

Juliette wouldn't understand. She'd think he was abandoning her, and her heart would surely break. She'd wished on a shooting star and still believed there was a possibility it could come true. How could he have mocked her so cruelly? He sighed and forced his feet to move. The sooner he found her the quicker he'd be able to grovel at her feet.

He found her in the billiards room pushing the balls across the table. They rolled across the smooth surface and hit the other side with a soft thunk. "If your father finds you in here you'll be punished."

"I don't care," she replied mulishly. "Christmas is ruined anyway. I'd be happy to stay in my room for the rest of the festivities. At least then I wouldn't have to see you."

Grayson sighed. Why did his heart melt whenever he was around her? This little girl had meant so much to him for so long... Her raven-black tresses spilled around her shoulders in soft curls, and her blue-green eyes usually sparkling with mischief were now filled with misery. That was his fault. He'd ruined Christmastide for her, and it wasn't going to improve much with his apology.

"Please forgive me," he coaxed. "I didn't mean to take out my concerns on you."

She perked up at his words. Her eyes were brighter and some of the sadness left them, but the evidence of her gloom still bloomed on her barely dried cheeks. "What is bothering you?" She moved to his side. "I'll help if I can."

She would do anything for him as he was well aware. That is what friends did for each other. Soon they'd have too much distance between them, and friendship between a lord and a lady wasn't done. It was best that he cut the ties now and left her to grow up without him by her side. His father explained he couldn't have a friend like Lady Juliette if he was at Eton. He'd be a laughing stock and be twice as miserable.

"There's nothing you can do for me poppet," he said. "I'm to go to school and won't be living next door any longer."

"No," she said. "You can't leave I won't let you."

He pressed his lips together and slowly shook his head. "I must. I'll

be a duke someday and I need to be educated so I can properly run my estates.”

Juliette stuck her nose in the air and folded her arms over her chest. “That’s not happening for a very long time. Your father is the duke, and he doesn’t have to send you away.”

“Oh, Jules,” he said with sadness. “I want to go.”

That was the hardest part for him. He craved more than knowledge. He wanted friends who were not little girls who lived next door. Boys his own age and who shared similar interests. Juliette was his past and he had a future he must plan for. Staying cooped up in his father’s estate with only a tutor and a mere girl as his only friend wouldn’t aide him in his goals.

“I thought as much,” she said glumly. “I’d hoped it was against your will.”

His lips twitched. Juliette always did manage to surprise him. She was only nine years old, but sometimes acted as if she was on the verge of her come out. He supposed it had a lot to do with their isolation. Neither one of them was allowed to play with the servant’s children, nor were there any other children of their rank around to fill in the gaps. They’d been forced to grow up much too young.

“It won’t be forever,” he promised. “I’ll be home on holidays and school breaks. We’ll see each other again.”

Juliette sat down on a nearby chair. “It won’t be the same.”

What could he do to make her understand? Nothing. She didn’t need him to explain any of it. Her gaze said it all. She was aware of why he had to go away—it just wasn’t to her liking. “In time you’ll forget about me. You’ll go to finishing school and learn how to become a proper lady. Then you’ll have your come out and find a husband. I’ll be a distant memory, a foolish boy who was once a neighboring playmate.”

She shook her head. “I could never forget you.”

Sadly he believed that was true. A part of him didn’t want her to. This might very well be their last Christmastide together, though, and he didn’t want to waste it with melancholy thoughts. There had to be something he could do to bring a smile back to her face. An idea took root and he decided to try it.

“I don’t want to leave you sad,” he said. “I have a present for you. Would you like it now?”

“Oh, yes,” Juliette bobbed her head. “Please.”

“Give me a moment to retrieve it,” he explained. “Meet me in the sitting room. I don’t want you to be punished if you’re found in here.” He couldn’t help his need to protect her. As long as he was around her—she’d always come first. It had been ingrained in him for so long it was a habit he had trouble breaking.

“Very well,” she agreed.

They both exited the billiards room. Juliette headed toward the sitting room, and Grayson headed toward his guest chamber. During Christmastide his family spent half of it at Riverdale Park and Juliette’s family spent the other half at Kissinger Castle. The gift he’d purchased for Juliette, Grayson had always planned on giving her in private. His father would berate him if he was aware of what he’d had commissioned. Juliette would love it though. He quickly retrieved the small box and tucked it inside his pocket. Satisfied it was secured; Grayson left his room and toward the sitting room. He found Juliette staring out the window once again. This was his second chance to redo his earlier blunder. He’d not make the same mistake again.

“Any more shooting stars?”

She giggled. “No I think that was the only one we’re going to ever see.”

“I don’t know. One day we might be lucky enough to see another.”

What boy of twelve had ever looked at a girl and knew she was the only one who’d ever own his heart? Grayson gazed down at her in wonderment. He was being absurd. Juliette was a mere nine years old. He’d not be able to tell the woman she’d become in the next decade. They had a lot of growing up to do and may not suit after they reached their majority.

“Did you bring my gift?”

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the small box. His hand was fisted tightly around the sharp corners. When he’d purchased it he’d believed Juliette would love it. What if he was wrong? There was one way to find out. With much trepidation he stretched out his arm and offered it to her. She clapped gleefully and tore open the box.

And then remained silent for several heart wrenching moments...

“Oh Gray.” She sighed. “It’s so lovely.”

She picked up the delicate locket and flipped it open...inside nestled a tiny portrait of him. “If you don’t like it you can put—”

“Don’t even consider finishing what you were about to say. This is the best gift you could’ve ever given me.” She kept it tightly in her grasp. “Whenever I’m sad you’re gone, I can look at it and remember you.”

He let out a sigh of relief. So he’d not misjudged, but a part of him wondered if he was only delaying the inevitable. His job was to encourage her to move on, and this wasn’t achieving that goal.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Can you promise me something?” she asked.

Grayson wanted to promise her the world. He’d lay it at her feet if it kept her smiling and as happy as she was in that moment. “Of course,” he said emphatically.

“If I ever need you, you’ll be there for me.” She gazed up into his eyes with trust shining through. “No matter what it takes.”

Grayson opened his mouth to respond, but wasn’t sure if he was capable of it. What she asked should be an easy thing to agree to, but he feared it wouldn’t be so simple. Nothing ever was where promises were concerned. He’d hate to break it, and in turn the part of her he’d always adored. Her faith in him was unwavering and a little unnerving. He feared he’d never live up to her expectations. Perhaps he was over thinking things and should give her what she desired. Chances were they’d not see much of each other after this Christmastide either way. So he gave in and agreed.

He nodded. “I promise I’ll always be there. You can depend on me to do whatever is necessary to aid you.”

Grayson vowed he’d keep that promise, even it cost him everything...

Chapter 1

Could her life possible get any worse? Lady Juliette Brooks fell on her bed and let out a frustrated sigh. She should be able to go out in society, and find a husband. Her only desire was to escape her father's house and start a family of her own. Truthfully, she'd settle for escaping alone—her stepmother Eloise was the bane of her existence.

If only Mother hadn't died... Everything would be so different, and Juliette wouldn't have had her first season cut short. She'd not been out a fortnight before tragedy struck her family. There'd been no time to find proper suitors, and even if a gentleman had caught her eye no one noticed her. She'd made no friends, barely conversed with a soul, and found the sidelines much to her liking. At least that last part is what she kept telling herself. She'd never imagined she'd be a wallflower watching all the other ladies twirling around the ballroom and laughing with enjoyment.

None of it had gone as she'd planned, and the one person she'd wanted to see hadn't bothered in too many years to count. After the mourning period ended, Juliette fully believed she'd rejoin society and the marriage mart. Nothing of the sort happened. Instead, her father had found Eloise and promptly married her. The new Lady Riverdale wanted nothing to do with Juliette. She'd not commissioned any new gowns and made no plans to re-launch her in society. Father had been too smitten with his new countess to bother with Juliette. She might as well have become invisible as much notice as those around her paid to her life. After a while she'd rather liked no one bothering her. She buried herself in books and embraced the life of spinsterhood. Why bother with marriage when she had all she needed at her father's home. Who needed new frocks when her old ones could be redesigned and altered? At least that was what Juliette kept telling herself.

Until her little brother was born she kept to herself and did as she pleased. With father finally having his heir he suddenly realized he

had another child. A daughter he'd neglected, and tossed aside for his new family. Juliette suspected Eloise prompted his sudden attention. She'd been eyeing her warily for a while, and made no secret she'd wanted her gone. So years after she should have had a second come-out Juliette's season was being planned.

At five and twenty she'd let that dream go.

She couldn't dawdle in her room much longer. Her father had summoned her presence in his study. What he wanted she could only guess, but ever since the maid had informed her of the request, Juliette's stomach had been a flutter of unease. Slowly she strolled down the stairs and headed in the direction of her father's study. She paused outside the entrance and listened.

"Lord Payne will make a wonderful husband for Juliette," her step-mother cooed. "At her advanced age she has little choices, and a viscount is more than she could hope for."

Juliette opened her mouth as a silent gasp slipped out. She lifted her hands and placed both over her face. Surely Eloise wasn't that cruel. Did she not know the viscount's reputation? He was rumored to beat servants and small children. What he considered his could be dealt with as he pleased. He'd not treat a wife any differently. She'd rather die than tie herself to such a man. Her father wouldn't agree—he couldn't...

"He does possess a good fortune," her father replied. "His estates are flourishing, he's neither given to excessive drink nor gambling."

Juliette's heart fell at her father's words. There was more to a man than how much he imbibed or gambled. She did not want to be saddled with a poor man, but if given the choice she'd rather live in a hovel than be beaten every day. That was what her fate would be if they forced her to marry Lord Payne. Juliette stepped closer and peaked inside the slit in the door.

"He isn't too old for her either." Her step-mother sat down in her father's lap. "She'll still be able to have a family of her own. Juliette should know the joys of motherhood. It's a good match. When Lord Payne arrives in a few days to sign the marriage contract, your daughter will be well taken care of."

Juliette clenched her fingers together into a tight fist. How dare she? All she cared about was herself. She saw Juliette as competition, and was doing everything in her power to get rid of her. What was the hurry? The spring season wasn't that far away, only mere months. Why was Eloise forcing the issue so soon? Did Juliette not deserve a choice?

She couldn't take it anymore. If she had to listen a second longer she'd lose the contents of her stomach. This plan of Eloise's must be stopped. Juliette eased the door open and cleared her throat. "Ahem,

father, you asked to see me.”

Eloise and her father were locked in a passionate embrace. A gag rose in her throat at the sight. She should be used to it by now, but it always sat uneasily inside of her. Her new step-mother was an usurper in her life. She'd never take the place of her mother, and she'd never stop missing the woman's love. The new countess while a beauty, was selfish and vain.

Eloise stood and crossed the room to meet her. “Please, come in dear. There's much your father and I wish to discuss with you.”

She bet they did. They were about to unload a bunch of misery on her she'd not felt—well not since her mother's death, and before that the abandonment of her only friend. What was one more momentous bout of melancholy to add to her list? This one would be the last if she had anything to say about it.

“Oh?” she raised an eyebrow. “Please continue.”

“Why don't you have a seat dear.” Her father gestured toward a chair. “There is much we have to tell you.”

Juliette did as her father bid and sat in a chair. Her father's study had been one of her favorite places as a child. At least in their London townhouse. Her favorite place to be was Riverdale Park, but she'd not been to her family's country seat in years. Not since her mother's death. Her father had chosen to remain in London instead of visiting a place of happier times. It had brought nothing but pain to him, and then he'd met Eloise. The new countess abhorred country life and begged him to remain in London. A part of Juliette longed for Christmastides of the past. When Riverdale Park was filled with visitors and the festivities lasted days.

London was rather ugly and drab in comparison.

“After careful deliberation,” her father began. “I've come to a decision regarding your future.”

“You have?” Juliette tilted her head. “Am I to shop for new gowns? I do need some current attire for the upcoming season.”

If her father was aware of her penchant for listening at doors he'd punish her for her insolence. For now she'd play along with his news, and then afterward she'd make a plan of escape. She'd not be marrying Lord Payne.

“I'm afraid that won't be necessary,” Eloise said. Her lips tilted up smugly. “You won't be having a season as planned.”

“I'm not?” She widened her eyes in feigned shock. “Why? Has something happened?”

She wanted to wipe that smug smile off of the countess's face. She believed she'd won, but in time she'd realize she hadn't. Eloise wanted her gone, and she'd get her wish one way or the other.

Her father's gruff voice interrupted her musings. “I've been in talks

with Viscount Payne. He's interested in marriage to you, and it's my belief it will be a good match. He'll be here in less than a sennight to go over the marriage contracts."

Juliette clenched her fingers together. She could not give into the desire to scream. It wouldn't do if she showed any emotion. If she did Eloise would use it against her, and in turn drive her father in the direction she wanted him to go.

"Father," she began. "I appreciate you looking out for me, but marriage to Lord Payne is not something I desire. While I don't blame mother—I did miss out on my season. I'd prefer to at least have a small season." She smiled encouragingly. "A choice at least in husbands."

Please let him agree. She couldn't marry Lord Payne. Hadn't she already paid the ultimate price? No, she supposed not. That would include the loss of her life, and that price was too high... She had too much she wanted to do with her life.

"I'm afraid I can't humor you, child." Juliette almost snorted. She'd not been a child in years, but perhaps her father would always see her as such. "Lord Payne insists that I sign the contract now or not at all."

That worked perfectly as far as she was concerned. She didn't want to marry the viscount, and no amount of coaxing would change her mind. "I see," she replied. "That would be a grave loss for sure..." She paused and considered her words. "But surely there would be others willing to marry me. Ties to the Riverdale line aren't anything to scoff at."

"You're correct," he agreed. "However the same could be said about Lord Payne. It's a good match and I'm not changing my mind. The contracts will be signed before the end of Christmastide, and you'll be married after the new year once the bans have been read."

Juliette gulped down the lump in her throat. There was no reasoning with her father. He was fully ensconced in Eloise's control. She was pulling his strings, and therefore she presumed Juliette's. Well the countess would see in time that no one would ever control her. Before the day was out she'd be gone, and out of their lives.

"As you desire," Juliette nodded demurely. She couldn't give them even a hint of what she had planned. "May I be excused?"

"Yes dear," her father said. "When Lord Payne arrives I want you to be on your best behavior."

"Of course father," she replied. "I'm always the proper lady." Not that he'd felt the need to send her to finishing school. Her father could be quite miserly with funds at times. He'd believed it wasn't necessary to spend a fortune on schooling a mere girl. The earl left her deportment lessons to her mother and governess.

She bowed her head and then stood to leave. When she reached

the entrance her step-mother's voice made her pause. "Juliette dear," Eloise said. "I'll escort you to your room. There is something I wish to speak with you about."

Drat. What did the woman want? Hadn't she done enough to ruin her life? Juliette turned and met Eloise's gaze. "I look forward to it." She waited for the countess to join her. They strolled side by side down the hall in silence. When was she going to say something?

"I hope you won't put up a fuss about the marriage," Lady Riverdale began. "Lord Payne will make a good husband for you."

Juliette bit down on her bottom lip. A drop of blood trickled into her mouth from the impact. If she said what was truly in her heart Lady Eloise would make things much worse for her, and escape near impossible. For now she must appear as biddable as possible.

"I look forward to starting a family of my own. It's what I've always wanted."

"Good. I'm glad we were able to arrange an advantageous match for you."

They reached Juliette's chamber. Thank God. She could bid Eloise good night and start her plan of escape. "Good night Lady Riverdale." She always addressed Eloise formally. It was what Eloise preferred. In her thoughts though she called her anything she wanted. The countess nodded her head dismissing Juliette.

After she was inside she locked the door and pulled out her reticule. She'd not be able to take much with her, but there were a few items she refused to leave behind. Most of it was sentimental in value as she had little worth. The little bit of pin money she had would have to do. She hoped it wouldn't matter either way.

If he kept the promise he made her all those years ago, she'd not worry for anything. He was her last hope, and if he refused her she'd have no choice but to follow her father's dictate. She prayed it wouldn't come to that. It was a sad day indeed when her life depended upon the Duke of Kissinger—desolate rake, debaucher of anything in a skirt, and a reprobate of the highest level. The scandal sheets took pleasure in outlining many of his exploits.

Chapter 2

Grayson Abbot, the Duke of Kissinger lounged in his study sipping a fine brandy. He'd vacated his good friend Christian, the Marquis of Knightly's townhouse earlier that evening. He enjoyed the company of good friends, and the townhouse definitely boasted a few of them, but he'd also been a little depressed watching them bask in their happiness. An emotion that had eluded him for more years than he recalled. No that wasn't entirely true, he could pinpoint the exact moment when it had been ripped from his life.

He blamed his father for it.

Grayson lifted the goblet of brandy in a mock toast. "This is to you good ole' dad." He downed the remaining contents in one gulp. It was more than the bastard deserved.

After he'd gone away to Eton he'd not been permitted to return home. It was his father's brand of tough love. The previous duke hadn't liked his growing friendship with the Earl of Riverdale's daughter. Boys don't have girls as playmates—at least according to the dictates of his late father.

His death freed Grayson in so many ways, but his fate had been set long before that blessed event. Instead of giving into his father's demands of education and strict structure of running the estates, Grayson took a different path. One that led to debauchery of every kind imaginable. It was an endeavor he took very seriously. Decadence, followed by wickedness, could only be done right when he threw himself into it whole heartedly. He'd not regretted one moment of it. At that point in his life he'd already lost anything worth keeping, and all he'd held dear would forever be out of reach.

"Pardon me, Your Grace," his butler, Burrows, said. "A visitor is here to see you."

Grayson growled at the announcement. "Who the bloody hell would come here at this late hour?" All of his friends were still at Knightly's townhouse. He'd left to escape their sickly outpouring of

joy. This was unacceptable. Was it too much to ask for peace and quiet in his own home?

"It's a lady, Your Grace."

Well, well, that was something different entirely. A woman was exactly what he needed. He rubbed his chin and considered who it could be. Lady Danvers had taken an interest in him when he ran into her at the opera, or it could be the lead in the opera... The list was endless. He liked to keep his options open and never committed to any one woman.

"By all means show the lady in," he ordered. "A lady is always welcome to keep me company." Burrows remained still inside the doorway. Why hadn't he gone to retrieve the woman already. Grayson was excited to see which fair beauty had the daring to grace his home uninvited. "Why are you still standing there? Go fetch her. It's not good to keep a lady waiting. They don't like that sort of thing." Unless it built up passion and desire, then the screams were well worth it.

Burrows cleared his throat. "It's not that kind of lady, Your Grace."

His butler was well acquainted with Grayson's proclivities. If he said the woman in question wasn't his usual sort—that could only mean one thing. It was an innocent he wouldn't have the pleasure of ravishing, that is, unless he planned on being caught by the parson's trap. Something he had no intention of ever doing. He didn't care if he never had an heir to pass his title down to. The damned thing could go to whatever distant cousin was next in line.

"In that case," he replied. "Please inform the chit I'm not at home to visitors." A part of him wondered who it was, but he couldn't allow himself the honor of finding out. She was better off not entering any further than the foyer. Just being in his home could tatter her reputation. He was doing her a favor by denying her an audience.

"When it's clear you very much are?" A feminine voice filled the room.

Grayson sighed. She wasn't going to be denied anything apparently. It was too late to save her from herself. Very well, he'd deal with her and then send her on her way. He turned and sucked in a breath momentarily stunned. A silhouette of pure beauty greeted him. Her midnight tresses were wound up and bound neatly into an elegant chignon. His fingers itched to unwind it and see it flow over her luscious curves. All of this and he'd still not seen her face. When she finally turned to meet his gaze he lost all ability to breathe. Those sea-green eyes kept him riveted in place. He should stand and greet her but his body refused to function. She was the last person he expected or wanted to enter his home.

"What no words?" She raised an eyebrow. "And I thought you were noted as the witty duke amongst the *ton*. I must say, I'm rather

disappointed.”

Grayson drank in the sight of her. He wanted to remember her as she stood before him for the rest of his days. She was glorious, proud, and fearless. “Didn’t your father teach you better than to enter the lion’s den?” He lifted a brow mockingly. “You could very well get eaten alive.”

Her lips tilted at the corner. “I rather like my chances.” She moved further into the room. “After all I’ve tamed a lion before.”

“There’s a difference between a young cub, and a full grown male, Jules,” he explained. “One is more docile and willing to cuddle. The adult wants to be petted—in other ways.” He stood up and gazed directly into her eyes. “A bite can be pleasurable or....” Grayson crossed over to her side and leaned down, whispering in her ear, “or painful depending on your preference.”

Juliette took a deep breath but remained where she stood. He’d give her that much. She’d always been a stubborn girl, and apparently she’d not grown out of that trait. If she didn’t take a step back soon he’d be forced to make a choice. Either he pulled her into his arms and kissed her the way he craved or he put distance between them respecting her innocence. It was a hard decision and warred deep inside him, but he did what was best for her. Turned out that some things were ingrained. Protecting her had always been his first instinct.

“If you’re done trying to intimidate me, I have something I wish to discuss with you.”

“I need a drink,” he said ignoring her statement. He headed toward his decanter of brandy and filled his glass to the top. If he were to make it through this interview he’d need a little, no make that a lot, of liquid courage. Dealing with Lady Juliette Brooks was something he’d hope to avoid for the rest of his life. He’d done her a disservice by befriending her all those years ago.

“It seems you’ve had plenty already.” She scrunched her nose up with displeasure. “Must you pour more down your throat?”

He lifted a brow. “One doesn’t pour fine brandy down their throat,” he mocked. “It’s sipped, savored, and drawn out to enhance the enticing flavor. Good liquor is as delectable as a woman. A fine one deserves slow intricate attention to thoroughly appreciate it.”

She sighed. “All you had to do was say *no*.” Juliette placed her hands on her hips. “You can dispense with your rake rhetoric. I don’t have time for it.”

Just like that she dismissed everything he’d said as nonsense. Why wasn’t any of it working on her? Other ladies swooned when he spoke with such wickedness. But not Lady Juliette, no, she brushed it aside as nonsense. How was he to scare her off if she didn’t take a word he

said seriously?

"Would you like a drink?" Grayson gestured toward the decanter. "It appears you could use a stiff one." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

She glanced at the brandy and then back at him. "Yes. Please pour me a glass. It's been a tiresome day, and it would help me relax."

It was the last thing he expected to come out of her mouth. Maybe he didn't know her as well as he'd thought. It had been a long time since they'd had an actual conversation. Sure, he'd been kept informed, but that wasn't the same as being a part of her life. Keeping his distance had seemed like a good idea. Now that she was in front of him, and more beautiful than he recalled, his error was clear.

He poured her brandy and handed it to her. "Why haven't you married?"

Her mother's death had stopped her season early, but that shouldn't have prevented her from having several potential suitors. Why hadn't she had another season after her mourning period ended? Was her grief that great? She should be married, happy, and a mother of several children by now. It had been what he'd prayed for.

The tidbits he'd garnered over the years told him the little details. Riverdale, along with his daughter, remained in London, the earl remarried and had his heir, and Lady Juliette was fast becoming a spinster who rarely went out in society. He didn't quite understand why.

"No one wants me. I was a wallflower, and then I had no season at all."

He found that hard to believe. Who wouldn't want her? She was more beautiful than any woman he'd ever known. Perhaps he saw her differently, but he doubted it. The small glimpse of her he'd had at her come out ball had been enough for him to see how lovely she'd become. It was the last sight he'd had of her before he ran to the nearest gaming hell and drowned his sorrows in a bottle of brandy. He barely recalled much after that. Somehow he'd managed to find his way home and had planned to spend the night alone.

"They're all fools," he said. "None of them deserve you." He swallowed half the contents of his glass.

"Yes, well, you weren't there. So how would you know?"

It pained him to see the hurt filling her eyes. She glanced down and played with the rim of her glass. Grayson could tell her he'd gone, but what good would that do? He'd not been able to stay. His father had still been alive then and held him in check. Soon after that the damage had been done and he'd found solace in becoming a man his father despised.

"Right you are." He lifted his glass and saluted her. "Your skill at

putting me in my place has always been superior.”

Juliette lifted her glass and took a long unladylike swig. She sat on a nearby settee and settled her glass on the table next to it. “I’m not here to trade barbs with you.”

“That’s right you had something you wished to discuss.” He swallowed the contents of his drink. The longer she was in his home the harder it was becoming to keep his hands to himself. Perhaps drinking was a foolish idea, but it kept him busy on something other than her. He filled his glass once again and turned his attention to her. “What are you waiting for? Tell me why I’m honored with your presence after I don’t know how many years.”

“Fifteen,” she replied.

“Heh?”

“It has been, well almost, fifteen years since you left for Eton. You didn’t write, you never came home again, and you forgot about me.” She played with her skirt. “The anniversary of the end of our friendship is in less than a sennight, but I don’t expect you to remember.”

“Right again,” he said. The truth would be his to own. Maybe one day he’d explain it all. Today wasn’t that day. “But we’ve digressed again. Please state your reason for coming here today. I’d like to retire for the evening and this conversation has grown tedious.”

“It’s simple really,” Juliette said. “I need you to marry me.”

“Come again?” He had to have heard her wrong. How much of the brandy had he imbibed?

“You promised me,” she explained. “If I ever needed you, you’d be there for me.” She lifted her lashes and stared into his eyes. “My life depends on your willingness to assist me. This is imperative, please say you’ll help me.”

Bloody hell... How could he say no to that?

Easy enough, open up his mouth and utter the words she didn’t want to hear. “No.”

The Duke of Kissinger wasn’t the marrying sort and it was better she understood that straight away.

Chapter 3

“N^o?” The blasted man had dismissed her without hearing

her out. “That’s it? You won’t even listen to me?”

“If it is to beg me to marry you,” he replied. “Then we’re done. There’s nothing more to say on the matter.”

Ohhhh. He was so obstinate. She wanted to shake him and make him see reason. Unfortunately that wouldn’t garner in any good. Juliette didn’t believe in wasting her time. He’d left her no choice but to make him listen. Nothing would make her move from his home until he did. The dastardly duke owed her at least that much.

“I understand.” She forced herself to continue meeting his gaze. “I’d hope the rumors weren’t true.”

“Trust me they’re much worse,” he replied in a husky tone. “Maybe one day I’ll share some of my more titillating stories with you.”

“Oh?” Juliette lifted a brow. As if she wanted to hear about him with other women, but perhaps that was the point. He hoped to scare her into silence. She’d bet every last bit of her pin money he’d not appreciate it being turned back on him. “What’s stopping you? I’d love to hear some of your seedier tales. It’s past time we reacquainted ourselves with each other.” She patted the settee, batting her eyelashes at him. “Come sit down and tell me everything.”

“You’re an unnatural female,” he blustered. “Leave it to you to take the fun out of everything.”

Well that went better than she’d anticipated. He’d not be unloading his more lecherous proclivities upon her. Juliette was grateful as she’d not been particularly keen about listening to any of it.

“Are you ready to pay attention now?” She sipped on her brandy. Her life depended on him agreeing to marry her. “I’m rather tired it’s been a trying day. I’d like to settle this so we can move onto the next step.”

“There is no next step,” Grayson replied. “I believe I said no.”

Juliette would not be deterred. Her whole life everything good had either been taken away or put on hold. At one time this man before her had been on the list of good things. She'd like for him to be on that list once again. Either way it didn't change her current situation. Without Grayson's help she'd be left with little choice. Marrying Lord Payne wasn't something she could stomach, and might not live through if even a fraction of what she'd heard was true. Most people didn't pay her any mind and she'd overheard details not meant for innocent ears.

"My father has arranged a marriage for me..."

"Good then you don't need me." He turned away from her. "Glad we had this chat."

What would it take to make him understand how dire her situation was? He'd understand once she said the name of the man her father intended to betroth her to. If she'd heard about his sadistic demeanor, then Grayson would probably have firsthand knowledge. Juliette took a deep breath and said, "Lord Payne."

Grayson whipped around and met her gaze. "Viscount Payne?"

"Is there any other Lord Payne you're familiar with?"

He shook his head and narrowed his eyes. "What does the lord in question have to do with anything?"

"Not much," she said in feigned nonchalance. "He's only my intended groom."

A string of curse words came out of his mouth that should have made Juliette blush. Finally he was beginning to understand the dire nature of her situation. Maybe she should have led with that information. It might have saved her some time. As stubborn as Grayson was though, she doubted it.

"He's to sign the contract within the sennight." She stood and walked over to him. "Less than that from what my father told me earlier. I can't marry him. I'd prefer to stay a spinster living in a cozy cottage with a bunch of cats for company. Anything is preferable to marrying that dreadful man." She nibbled on her bottom lip. "I'm desperate or I wouldn't be here. I'd hoped you would recall the long ago promise and honor it. Please, Gray, help me. If you marry me I'll have the protection of your name. There would be nothing my father or Lord Payne could do."

He scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed. "I don't want to marry. It's nothing to do with you, in fact, you deserve far better than the likes of me." His eyes were filled with a misery she didn't understand. The joking rake had disappeared and a piece of the Grayson she'd used to know stood before her. "I did make you a promise, and I should keep it. You're right, Lord Payne can't have you."

"You won't regret helping me."

"I already do." He cupped her cheek in his hand. "I'll marry you even though everything inside of me says it's a terrible idea."

She didn't understand why he thought it would be that bad. What reason could he possibly have for believing that. Surely he'd want an heir of his own. A tingle spread through her at the idea of lying with him. He was a renowned rake and ladies sought him out as a lover. It wouldn't be all bad—it couldn't be.

"I understand," she replied.

"Good." He said. "Then you'll also understand it will be a marriage in name only. It's all you need, and as a duchess no one will question you."

There went her dreams of having his children. Maybe in time he'd change his mind. For now it was a victory for him to agree to the marriage. "If that's what you want," she agreed. "I'm grateful you're willing to help."

"Good," he said. "Make yourself comfortable it's going to be a long ride to Gretna Green and I have arrangements to make."

Her mouth opened with shock. "You want us to leave immediately?"

The situation was dire, but did it necessitate they head toward Scotland immediately? He was right in that it was a long journey. A four days ride at the very least, but it would probably be much longer than that in truth. They'd have to stop along the way and change horses. That alone would delay the trips progress, and it didn't take into account any stops for food or other necessities.

"You're here, and at some point your family will realize you're gone." He sighed. "If you want to see this wedding through we need to make sure they don't figure out where or what you have planned and prevent it. I may be a duke, but no respectable family wants to tie me to theirs."

"You're right."

"Say that again." His lips tilted upward. "I may never hear those words from you again."

Her lips twitched at his light teasing. He wasn't brooding any longer and it was a preferable state. She hated seeing him so melancholy. Even his roguish teasing was better than that. They might have a chance of connecting once again. Juliette hoped they would be able to. The walls he'd erected were high and sturdy, but if she was determined enough, and Juliette believed she was, she could knock them down.

"Didn't you have some plans to make?"

"Indeed I did," he replied. "Wait here and when everything is ready I'll retrieve you so we can depart." With that pronouncement he

spun on his heels and exited the room.



Grayson headed up to his room and shut the door. He leaned his head against it and knocked it lightly against the sturdy wood. What the hell happened downstairs? Was he really going to marry Lady Juliette Brooks. His friends would laugh hysterically when they received word of his downfall. They'd not understand the *whys* of it. Hell, he wasn't even sure he wanted to explain it to them. Not once since he'd made their acquaintance had he mentioned his friendship with Juliet. He'd done everything in his power to put her in the past and keep her there.

What kind of husband could he possibly be? He had no idea how to act decent any more. He'd embraced the life of debauchery and hadn't seen any reason to stop. For her he'd have to make an effort. If he continued on the path he was on she'd become a laughing stock in society. She was his first friend and he respected her too much to put her through any of that.

Grayson had told her he had to make plans for their departure. That in itself was a lie. His staff would take care of everything all he had to do was give the order. He'd actually needed time away from her to think. After they were married she'd be his. Why had he told her the marriage would be in name only? What cruel joke was he playing on himself? The only way he'd be able to hold to that was to live in a different house than her. Just being in the same room as her made him itch to touch her. Her skin was creamy and he wanted to find out if it was as soft as it appeared. Juliette's kid skin gloves beckoned to him. At the first opportunity he wanted to unbutton them, peel them off, and kiss the palm of her hand. There were so many things he craved to do to her, with her, he'd lost count of them all. She'd always fascinated him, but now it was on an entirely different level.

A knock on the door brought him back to the present. He'd escaped Juliette's company to make plans for their departure, and he'd yet to make any.

"Pardon me, Your Grace," Burrows called through the door. "I'm wondering what you'd like for me to do with Lady Juliette."

So did he. Damned if he had any idea. He took a deep breath and opened the door. "Burrows I'm glad you sought me out. Send Smythe

upstairs. I need him to prepare my trunk for travel. Also have a footman ready my carriage. Lady Juliette and I are leaving immediately.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.” Burrows nodded and turned to leave.

It gave Grayson a few more moments to be alone. Soon Smythe, his valet, would arrive and he’d not have any peace for many days. The journey to Scotland would be tiresome and not leave them much privacy. He prayed her father wouldn’t guess Juliette had come to him, and definitely not uncover their plans for elopement. There shouldn’t be any reason for him to come to that conclusion. Over the years he had made sure to be careful where Juliette was concerned. She might not realize it but everything he did had been for her. His father had threatened her family, and he still had no idea why. What did he gain from keeping them apart? Grayson hadn’t become the obedient boy he’d hoped for, and he sure as hell hadn’t bowed down to him when he reached his majority. The only favor he’d done for Grayson was dying a few years ago. He’d finally been freed from his control once and for all.

“You summoned me, Your Grace,” Smythe said.

“Yes,” Grayson turned to him. “Pack my trunk and see it loaded on my carriage. Have a maid pack some of my mother’s gowns she left in residence. They’re going to be needed for Lady Juliette.” They would be a little long, but should fit her otherwise. His mother hadn’t stayed in the ducal townhouse since his father died so they were outdated fashions, but they’d work until he could hire a seamstress to make her more.

“I’ll make sure it’s all done. Is there anything else you require of me?”

“No. That’s all.”

Smythe bowed and started on the task Grayson gave him. There was one task he had to take care of himself. He went over to the lock box in his room and opened it. Inside, nestled on blue velvet, was his mother’s betrothal ring. She’d given it to him upon his father’s passing and told him to start searching for his own duchess. He’d ignored her demand and had no intention of using the ring. If given time he’d have purchased a new one for his intended.

Maybe he still would, but for the moment his mother’s would do. She’d deserved a ring as a token of his commitment. He’d give it to her on the journey. At least the sapphires would sort of match her eyes—although he doubted a gem could even come close to their sea-green depths.

After a period of time passed giving the servants to prepare the carriage, Burrows came to inform him everything was ready for their departure. “Thank you Burrows. I’ll inform Lady Juliette myself.”

He left his room leaving his temporary sanctuary behind. Juliette was where he'd left her, lounging on the settee. "Are you ready?"

"Nothing I'd rather do than travel to Scotland with you." She flashed him a warm smile. "Lead the way, Your Grace."

Grayson bit back a retort. Juliette had never been formal with him and he found he didn't like it. Whatever her reason was for doing so now he'd figure it out later. They had more important things to do. Besides they had a long journey ahead and a lot of time to play the question game. He'd figure out what was going on inside that pretty head of hers before they reached their destination.

Grayson helped Juliette into the carriage, then joined her inside. He took the seat across from her afraid to be too close to her warmth. It was going to be a very long sennight at this rate.

"Don't worry no one is going to stop us."

He wasn't entirely sure if that was a good thing or not. "Trust me. I'm not giving it a second thought." Grayson stared out the window at the night sky. It wasn't as clear in London as it was at his childhood home, but it gave him something to concentrate on. "Make yourself comfortable. Rest if you're able too. It will be a while before we stop to exchange horses."

Grayson leaned his head against the back of the coach and feigned sleep. It would give him some measure of comfort, and maybe she'd take her cue from him to rest.

Chapter 4

Juliette stared across the carriage and attempted to make out

Grayson's features in the dark. The shadow that marked the spot on his seat hadn't moved or made a sound in what seemed like forever. How could he sleep? It was near impossible for her to find any comfort, let alone rest, between the rocking carriage and frigid weather.

"Gray," she called out to him. No answer, blasted man—she didn't believe he was sleeping. Why was he pretending? Was it so tedious to converse with her? "Your Grace," Juliette said, "I've been thinking..." Maybe if she started talking she'd force him to acknowledge he was very much awake. The more outlandish the statement, the more likely he'd be unable to resist responding. "After we're married, I'll travel to Rome. You don't want a wife around hindering your—proclivities—and I've always wanted to visit Italy. Your comment about lions earlier brought it to mind."

Still nothing from his side of the carriage. She might have to bring it up a notch—or twelve. Good thing she was more than up to the challenge. "I've read a lot about the Colosseum and the gladiator matches." Juliette paused hoping he'd interrupt, but when he didn't she continued, "Venatores and Bestiarii were a special class of warrior that tangled with a variety of wild beasts. It was more of a gruesome animal hunt, not unlike a hunt sponsored by one of our lords happy to bring an innocent beastie to ground. Lions were a favored species on these hunts. They weren't the main show—the gladiators were there for that, but they did open the festivities and help feed the blood lust or the spectators. Of course the poor things weren't always slaughtered for sport, they were also used for executions."

"Is there a point to all this drivel?"

"Yes, I wanted to explain my interest in Rome and why I'll take a trip there after the wedding." Her lips tilted upward. Blasted man couldn't stop himself from responding. "Since it will be a marriage in

name only I don't see why I should stay and run your household. I trust you have competent staff to see to all of it."

"You're not going to Rome by yourself, brat."

Oh how she wished she could see his face. It was so hard to gauge his reaction without properly seeing his features. "Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "Did you want to go too? I didn't think touring the ruins would be to your taste."

"No I have no desire to go to bloody Rome, or any place far from the comfort of my own bed. Let me rephrase that for you—I'm not going to allow you to go anywhere other than to my townhouse or my country estate. I can't very well protect you if you're constantly putting yourself in danger." He sighed and the shadow like shape across from her moved.

She considered his words and how best to respond. As children they used to talk for hours on all the things they found fascinating. To her this was no different. Rome and the Colosseum had been interesting to her, especially since her social interactions had been limited. It gave her a reason to escape her mundane life and visit exotic locales through the pages of a book. Truthfully it had been enough for her to read about them, but since he was forbidding her... Well, she'd have to protest. He'd left her little choice on the matter.

"I never took you for a spoil sport," she responded. "With the reputation you've cultivated over the years, one would think you were all for anything considered risky or adventurous."

Every time she came across his name in the scandal sheet a piece of her heart died. She didn't know why he'd taken the path he'd chosen, but it was far from the boy she'd called a friend. A part of her believed he'd done it to distance himself from the pain in his life. His father hadn't been a kind man, and the little she interacted with him gave her a bad impression of his demeanor. Her own father wasn't a great man and made choices she abhorred—her betrothal a case in point, but she believed he loved her in his own way. The previous duke didn't appear to have a warm spot in his whole body. He was cold and unforgiving.

Juliette believed the only reason her family socialized with Grayson's was because her mother was fast friends with the duchess. Her father and Gray's had little in common. The duke was very active in parliament, and her father barely kept up with any of it. The earl loved hunting and the duke thought it was tedious and scoffed at the idea. They were as opposite as two individuals could be, but somehow they'd always come together at Christmastide.

"And what do you know of my reputation?" He chuckled "You hinted at the rumors before, and I believe I mentioned they're much worse. Do you want me to share now?"

She didn't really and he probably knew it too, but she'd brought it up. Trust Grayson to run with what he believed would make her uncomfortable. "If you're in the mood to tell tales by all means begin. Why don't we start with the day you left to Eton. I'd so hate to miss any part of what you've been doing since we last spoke."

"Ah Jules," he said warmly. "I do believe I'm going to enjoy reacquainting myself with you."

"So does that mean we're sharing life stories?" She asked. "or are we pretending the years of your silence never existed."

It pained her to admit how much his abandonment hurt her—a betrayal she'd not quite recovered from. If she'd had another choice, she'd not have gone to him for aid. Her father and evil step-mother, were the reason she sat on the other side of the carriage. In some ways she wanted to thank them for pushing her to seek Grayson out. She'd always wanted to ask him why he'd left without saying good bye. There was so much she didn't understand and believed she'd been owed an explanation. Now that they were to be married perhaps she'd finally have the answers she desired.

"Those years won't go away. They're solidly a part of who we are now," he said gravely. "As much as I'd like to will them away it's an impossible feat. As to sharing our stories..." He paused a moment and took a deep breath. "I'd rather avoid that as well. A lot of my past is best left where it is—behind me. Looking back won't change a damn thing. We will go from this point on, and hope the fates are kind enough to make us both find some measure of happiness."

It was a pretty speech, but Juliette didn't like one word he'd said. He wanted to brush everything under the rug and expected her to accept it. Why? Because he'd made a pronouncement and his word was law. She suppressed an unladylike snort, and replied, "That's a fascinating bit of nonsense. Your past is a part of you and what made you into this insufferable cad before me. I'd like to one day understand it, but I won't force it on you." She grinned wickedly. If he could see her he'd have run fast in the other direction. It was time to poke the beast. "Since you're forbidding me to visit Rome and see the Colosseum in person..." She sighed whimsically. "I had so hoped to have the opportunity to picture those strong viral beasts fighting battle after battle. It must have been amazing."

"The lions would appreciate your passion for their skills in battle," he replied dryly. "But I must insist you stay in England."

"Oh I wasn't talking about the lions, but don't misunderstand me. I do find them fascinating." She fanned herself. "The gladiators though—they must have been so skilled and brave. Some of them might have been handsome, but all of them surely were as brawn and manly as a male could be. My imagination has been running wild on what they

could've looked like. Do you have any ideas?"

"Why the bloody hell would I imagine what another male would look like?" He growled. "And neither should you."

It took everything inside of her not to laugh hysterically. This was so much fun. The trip to Scotland had just become infinitely better. He'd be so entertaining if it was this easy to provoke him. "Why ever not? What good is an imagination if you can't use it properly?"

"It's rather, well, ladies don't picture men or what their supposed appearances. It's not done."

Juliette snorted. It couldn't be helped. Now he was being ridiculous. "It's hypocritical of you to chastise me for merely envisioning a man in any form when your reputation suggests you've enjoyed females in ways my imagination hasn't breached."

"One doesn't have anything to do with the other," he replied. "It might not be fair, but females are held to a higher standard."

Statements such as that one wouldn't endear him to her. She should kick him for good measure. Males were so obstinate, and Grayson topped the list of stubborn fools more than any other. Once upon a time she'd thought the sun rose and set on him. He'd been her everything, and now she wondered who he really was. Sadly though, he was right. Society expected women to remain innocent and learn next to nothing about the world. Many men, and women alike, would be scandalized to realize she'd read about Rome, the Colosseum, and gladiators. Education was to be kept to mundane things such as watercolors, sewing, and music lessons. A well accomplished lady had proper deportment and decorum at all times.

"Lucky for you," she replied. "Your wife won't be as boring as to follow the rules set by society. I plan on keeping you guessing for the rest of your life."

A truer statement had never been uttered. She didn't like to be predictable, and hiding in dark corners had never appealed to her. It had become necessary when Eloise had entered her life. Escaping the countess's notice had grown into a game of sorts. If she didn't cross her path Eloise almost forgot she existed. For a time it had worked, until her little brother was born and her step-mother saw Juliette as competition for the earl's affection. She fully believed that was why Eloise was pushing her father to tie Juliette to Lord Payne in marriage. Now that she was on the brink of being free from her family she refused to hide herself ever again.

"My dear, none of that surprises me. You've been shocking me since the moment you entered my home. Why would I expect anything less?"

She smiled. "At least one of us had been predictable in a sense."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked affronted.

“I expected a rake,” she replied. “You put on a good show at first, but I have to say I’m rather disappointed. You’re rather—tame.”

If that didn’t result in a rise of outrage nothing would. Was it too much to desire a kiss from her intended. All right, he never planned on marrying anyone, outright refused her, and of course never asked for her hand, but he *was* going to marry her despite all of that. Juliette had never been kissed and more than anything she wanted him to be the one to do it.

“Are you challenging me?”

She shrugged, but wasn’t sure if he could see the gesture. “Of course not. It was an observation. If you’re the scoundrel everyone claims you to be wouldn’t you have already taken advantage of the situation? No one is stopping you, and we do intend to marry at the end of this journey.”

“I’m not a seducer of innocents,” he proclaimed. “And I’ll be damned if I start with you.”

Juliette sighed. *Drat*. Grayson was going to be difficult, and she wasn’t entirely sure how to achieve her goal. An idea formed in her mind and before she changed her mind she said, “I suppose I’ll have to have an affair. Otherwise I’ll never know true passion...”

Juliette sat back and waited for his response. It was bound to be good.

Chapter 5

“By all means, do.” There wasn’t a chance in hell he’d allow

her to find a lover. If another man so much as looked at her wrong he’d rip him to shreds. Grayson clenched his fists and kept his anger, and yes, jealousy, in check. If he exploded now she’d realize how much her statement bothered him. He couldn’t have that. She’d already owned far more of him than he was comfortable admitting. So his words belied what he truly felt. “I have no plans of ceasing any of my more pleasurable pursuits.”

“That’s generous of you,” she replied. “You’re not worried about being cuckolded?”

“My dear,” he said with sincerity. “A man is only a cuckold if he’s unaware or cares about his wife’s dalliances.” The sun was beginning to rise in the sky and her face was becoming more visible. Like a cloud moving away from the sun she was a bright beacon that brought warmth to his weary soul. “All I ask is you’re—discreet.”

It was becoming harder and harder to hold back his true feelings. He hated the idea of her with another man, always had. But as long as he’d kept a distance her potential lover or husband was ignorable. With her present, and oh so close, the possibility of it ate at him. How could he expect her to remain chaste, especially as he refused to touch her. He had to reassess his earlier proclamation. The only way he’d be able to avoid caressing her was to avoid her all together, and yet even that didn’t sit well with him.

“This is rather enlightening.” Her lips tilted upward. “So far I’d have to say the only downfall marriage to you would bring is your insistence I remain in England. I’ll take that as a challenge.” She waved her hand. “After a while you’ll gladly send me packing.”

He gritted his teeth. She could do her worst, but she’d not leave England without his protection. There were things in the world she didn’t understand or couldn’t be learned from a book. Juliette was innocent and couldn’t comprehend the depravity seeping into the

world. Grayson would ensure she didn't ever experience the seedier part of society. When she sought his protection of his name she'd unwittingly agreed to his need to shield her as he saw fit. In time she'd realize he only had her best interests in mind when he dictated his demands.

"Not bloody likely," he replied. "Nothing you could do or say would make me budge on that particular detail."

"We'll see," she replied. "It feels as if we've been in this carriage forever. When do you think we'll stop?"

Not soon enough in his estimation. Time away from her, and a moment to stretch his legs, were both very much needed. Sadly, he'd not have either one of them for several more hours. He'd ordered his driver to take a median pace. There was no need to rush and run the horses to ground, but he still wanted to arrive in Scotland as soon as possible.

"We will stop in the first town we reach around the midday meal. If you're hungry cook packed a few provisions for the journey."

"No," she said. "I'm too nervous to eat." Juliette rubbed her hands together and blew on them. "It's just... I'm cold. The blanket isn't enough."

Grayson sighed. He should be a gentleman and offer her his blanket, but he was cold too. The best solution to both of their problems was to offer to double up the blankets and share body heat. But that would mean he'd be in even closer proximity to her. If he held her in his arms he wouldn't be responsible for his actions. His hands would wander over her lush frame and he'd take full advantage of her. It was wrong, but it was who he was. She was to be his wife—didn't he have the right to stroke her any way he chose? Thoughts such as that one would surely lead to nowhere but trouble.

"Join me over here and bring your blanket," he said, resigned. He couldn't allow her to freeze. What kind of cad would allow a lady to shiver when there was an acceptable answer to the problem? One who was afraid of what the lady's closeness meant to his reputation. Grayson was supposed to be a rake—a scoundrel comfortable with debauchery, and he was felled by a mere lady. "I'll keep you warm."

Juliette didn't hesitate at his suggestion. He'd give her that much... Her bravery put the most hardened soldier to shame. Grayson lifted his blanket and she sat next to him, and handed her blanket to him. In one quick motion he had it spread over top of them both. With the double thickness of two blankets and their body heat spread over him.

"You're so warm," Juliette said and cuddled into him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest. "Why didn't we do this sooner?"

Because he was an inconsiderate arse. "Did you manage any

sleep?"

"No," she shook her head. "I was cold and uncomfortable." Her mouth opened wide as a yawn overtook her. "Though now that I have you as a cushion it might be possible."

Juliette wiggled and nestled more firmly against him. His entire body tightened with each move she made. His need heightened to a painful state. She was going to kill him. "Try and sleep. We have hours before we stop again."

"I might," she replied. "Gray?"

What would it take for her to stop moving, talking, or damn well driving him mad? "Are you going to ramble incessantly the entire time we're on the road to Scotland?"

She was quiet for several heartbeats. He'd started to believe she finally closed her eyes and went to sleep, but she'd had something else in mind. The more time he spent in her company the more he believed she'd be the death of him.

"I know you said our marriage would be in name only, and you don't mind if I find a lover, but..."

He closed his eyes and prayed for patience. What was she up to now? "Do you need me to say it again?" God help him, but he didn't know if he could give her what she wanted. His desire for her was increasing at an alarming rate.

"No. I understood the first time." She tilted her head and met his gaze. Her hand slid lower and rested at the edge of his trousers. His breath froze in his lungs. "What must I do to convince you I'd prefer you be my first—everything."

Grayson had been right, having her sit next to him was a bad idea. Her brazen touch was undoing his already weakened resolve. He couldn't fight her and himself—it was a futile effort. Somehow he had to rein in them both, and he had no idea how to halt it. "I'm honored..." The words he'd intended to say somehow had become lodged in his throat. Hurting her had always sat wrong with him. If he continued he'd crush her, and he couldn't do that. Nonchalance was one thing, but out and out cruelty he'd hoped to avoid.

"Don't say any more," she said after a moment. "I realized a long time ago I was no great beauty. My step-mother has told me on more than one occasion at best I can be described as plain. I won't push you to be with me if you're having trouble finding even an inkling of desire to do so."

Plain? He was baffled she believed she was unremarkable. She'd mentioned being a wallflower, but even that still confounded him. The part of him that always found her lovely, and always would, wanted to protest on her behalf. If she realized how crazy he was to touch her she'd never let this idea of hers go. There would be no going back if

he gave in to the craving he carried inside of him.

"It isn't that..."

"You don't need to explain," she said sadly. "I understand."

She didn't though, not at all. If she did she'd have an entirely different attitude toward him. Grayson didn't deserve her or what she offered. He was tainted by his choices. At the time he believed he was making the right decision. His father had put strict dictates in place and Gray had been expected to follow them to the letter. After he'd been forced to sever his friendship with her he'd lost all reason and went to the dark side of his nature. Once he embraced every depravity he could he realized there was no going back. He could never resume their friendship, and she'd be far better without him in her life.

"Jules," he said reassuringly. "You're not plain. Don't let anyone ever convince you of that claptrap ever again."

He couldn't agree to be her lover, but he could convince her she was beautiful. It wouldn't be a hardship or a lie. She was gorgeous inside and out. Her step-mother was probably jealous of her and set out to make Juliette doubt her own worth. Women let their claws out at the first sign of competition, and Jules was indeed that in the Riverdale household. It was a shame the earl hadn't married a kinder woman. Juliette's mother had been one of the most gracious and thoughtful women he'd known. Which was more than he could say for his own mother—she'd abandoned him at the first sign of adversity, maybe if she'd stood up to father his life would have taken a different turn. He'd never know one way or the other. There was no room for regrets in his life. He fully believed the past was left where it was, quite firmly behind him.

"You're only being nice because you think my feelings are hurt." She laid her head down on his chest once again. "Don't worry about me. I'm all right with being forgettable. In a way it makes things easier. When no one sees you they say some very interesting things. I've overheard a lot of titillating information by being invisible."

That had to be the saddest thing he'd ever heard in his life. "There is nothing good about going unnoticed. What kind of fools have you been socializing with?"

"Socializing is too strong a word for what I've been allowed to do." She sighed. "First I was in mourning, and then father remarried." Juliet raised her hand higher up his stomach leaving a trail of pleasure that continued on as she drew circles on his chest with her forefinger. He could become accustomed to her touch rather easily. "After that he forgot I existed until Eloise decided I must marry and leave my father's care. At first it sounded wonderful. My first season had been cut short, and I did long to have my own family. Now I'd rather have the freedom to choose for myself my own destiny."

“If you didn’t go out in society” —he paused and took a deep breath— “How did you overhear anything at all?” He’d not realized she’d been secluded from society? His informants failed to tell him she’d not returned to *ton* after her mourning period. But to be fair all he ever asked is if she was happy and healthy. It had been enough to know she was alive and well. The rest would have been a torture he’d not have been able to endure.

“My father had occasional dinner parties, and I was allowed to attend them.” She continued to run her fingers over his chest. He never wanted her to stop. “And sometimes he’d have a visitor. No one paid me any mind.”

They were all fools, especially her father. Grayson could take comfort in knowing she’d never endure indifference from him again. No, she’d endure it from him. How was he any better than what she’d been living with. He didn’t like the conclusion he was drawing from himself to her father.

“As a duchess you’ll be able to command society and set trends,” he said. It was all he could bring himself to offer.

“I never wanted to be sought after by the *ton*,” she said quietly. “All I ever wanted was to be loved by one person completely.”

His heart beat rapidly in his chest. He wanted to hug her tight against him and reassure her he’d love her always, but wouldn’t make a promise he couldn’t keep. Lucky, or maybe unlucky, for him he was saved from responding. The carriage rocked as it hit a jut in the road and wobbled back and forth. Then a crack echoed on the wind as they crashed on the side of the road.

Chapter 6

Stabbing pain shot through Juliette's head. She lifted her hand and placed it over the throbbing ache. What happened? The last thing she recalled was—had Grayson been about to say something? Damn it was all fuzzy inside her head. She rolled to her side and searched for him. He'd been by her side, and keeping her warm, now she was cold and alone.

"Gray?" she mumbled.

Juliette scrambled to her feet, her heart raced inside her chest. The carriage was slightly tilted and the door swung open. Wind whistled through the carriage and sending goose bumps up her arm. The biting cold settled deep inside her and if she didn't do something soon she'd freeze. Where was Grayson? Carefully she slid out of the carriage and stepped warily onto solid ground. She scanned the area searching for him. Not too far away from the entrance to the carriage she found him sprawled on the ground.

His eyes were closed and blood dripped from a gash on his forehead. She knelt beside him and cupped his face in her hands. "Grayson." Her voice wavered with barely restrained emotion. She brushed her fingers through his hair and said, "Please open your eyes."

He had to be all right. She refused to accept anything less. It was her fault they were on the road to Scotland. If she'd not insisted they marry he'd be safe at home. Juliette stood and scanned the area. The driver was a few feet ahead sitting on the ground. She rushed to his side and helped him to his feet. "His Grace is injured. I need your help with him."

He looked past her and cursed. "We hit a rut in the road and it threw a wheel. We're still a mile outside the nearest village. I'll have to ride one of the horses for help."

Juliette glanced from Grayson and then back to the driver. It would be up to her to see to Grayson's care while the driver went for

help. The wind was too strong and biting to stay outside the carriage, but tilted as it was they couldn't sit inside of it either. They couldn't stay in the cold for too long... "Please hurry. I'll grab the blankets from the carriage and keep him as warm as possible until you return."

"I'll be back before you realize I'm gone," he promised.

The driver unhitched a horse, hopped on its back, and headed toward the nearby town. Juliette prayed he'd return fast. She turned to the carriage and grabbed the blankets. Grayson needed to be kept warm, but she didn't have a clue how to ensure it. The ground was hard and cold. It wouldn't provide any of the necessary warmth even with the blankets on top of him. When she'd cuddled with him in the carriage it had helped. Perhaps that was the solution to her problem. If she were to wrap herself over him along with the blankets she'd be able to aide in keeping the cold at bay.

She spread one blanket over top of him, and then the other over it. Then studied her handiwork. He seemed rather uncomfortable, but it was hard to tell. Maybe something to cushion his head would help. She went back to the carriage and grabbed her hand muff. It was small, but large enough for a pillow to cushion his head. Carefully she lifted his head and placed it underneath. Satisfied with the result, she crawled under the blanket with him and wrapped her arms around his torso.

The ground was colder than Juliette realized and she shivered involuntarily. She laid her head on his chest and prayed they'd be rescued soon. After several moments warmth began to spread over her. It wasn't much, but enough to make the cold more bearable.

"Don't worry, Gray," she said. It was more for herself than him. He was unconscious and unlikely to reply. "The driver will be back before we know it. Then we can take sanctuary in a nice warm inn while they fix the wheel. I'm so sorry, more than I can say. This is all my fault."

It wasn't too late to rectify any of it. After she saw him safe and sound in the inn she'd turn back. Marriage to Lord Payne would be awful, but at least she would know Grayson was safe. In the end that was all that mattered to her. He might have complained, and on the outset said no, but he'd come through for her. When she decided to ask for his help she knew he'd not turn her away. There was some of the boy she'd grown up with still in the man—however faint it was.

She lifted her head and memorized his features. The boy had been soft and more pretty than handsome. The man was breathtaking. The soft edges had formed into high cheekbones, and soft full—kissable lips. He'd refused to kiss her. Juliette craved his lips on hers more than she'd ever wanted anything. One kiss and maybe then she could go on with life, satisfied.

What if she never got the chance. Should she take it now? Would he be upset if she did? She bit her lip and considered. It would be wrong to do something against his will, but she couldn't resist kissing him. It wasn't a kiss the way she wanted, but one of comfort. She leaned down and pressed her lips to his forehead. "I'll be by your side as long as you need me." Then she laid her head on his chest and snuggled against him.

That is the way she stayed until the driver returned with help. After they had Grayson loaded in the carriage they all headed back toward the village. The innkeeper and a couple of brawny lads helped carry him up to a room they'd prepared. A doctor had been summoned. Juliette sat in the main room and waited for the prognosis. As soon as they let her she'd return to his side. He was her responsibility and she'd make sure he made a full recovery.



Someone was beating his head with a hammer. Whoever dared was going to feel the back of his fist in their face. Grayson slowly opened his eyes and found the soft glow of candlelight. Juliet sat in a chair next to the bed. Her head lulled back against the chair. Her dark tresses were unbound and falling over her shoulder. He wanted to reach over and stroke them. They looked so soft inviting—hell everything about her did. Where were they? The last thing he remembered was being in the carriage, and then... Had they been in an accident?

He stretched his arms and fell back on the bed once again. The sharp pain shooting through his head was agonizing. Grayson lifted his hands and rubbed his temples. The torment dulled to a mild, and tolerable ache.

"You're awake," she said.

Slowly he turned to meet her gaze. "What happened?"

"Carriage wheel broke. It will be prepared by morning."

That explained part of it, but he still didn't understand how he ended up in a warm bed with her keeping vigil. "How long have I been out?"

"Not too long," she replied. "Well most of the day. You missed the midday meal. The doctor doesn't want you to have anything heavy. So the cook is making you a nice broth. It should arrive shortly if you're hungry."

His stomach rumbled at the mention of food. "I don't care what the doctor said. Broth won't be enough. Have them bring me a full meal."

Grayson realized he sounded like a petulant child, but his head hurt and he was hungry. The Duke of Kissinger always got what he wanted, and he wanted food, darn it. He turned his head a little too fast and the pain returned in full force. A wince escaped him before he could stop it.

"You're being absurd," she chastised. "Here let me massage your head. Just close your eyes and relax."

Juliette sat down on the bed next to him and placed her hands on either side of his head. She pressed her delicate fingers against his temples and rubbed slowly. He moaned in pleasure. The pain disappeared under her careful ministrations. It was amazing and he'd gladly lay there forever if she allowed it.

A knock echoed through the room and firmly ending the pleasure she'd been administering. She stood quickly and went to see who disturbed their peace. Juliette opened the door and greeted the interloper. Grayson wanted them gone so she could return to attending him. When she returned to his side she carried a tray with two mugs. Steam rose out of each one and his stomach rumbled again at the scents wafting from them.

"What is that?"

"These," she gestured toward them. "Are the broth you didn't want. Do you wish for me to send them back down to the kitchen?"

Was she only having broth too? She should have more sustenance. There was no reason for her to abstain—she'd not been injured or had she? "Give me a mug. You should go down to the kitchen and eat something. Broth isn't enough for you."

Juliette shook her head. "Both are for you." She set the tray on the chair and turned to him. "Let me help you sit up."

She thought she was going to take care of him? In a way he supposed she had been. But now that he was awake he'd not let her cater to his every need. The pain was already easing in his head and he could damn well sit up on his own. "I can do it myself." He struggled to a sitting position and then turned toward her. Grayson flashed her a smug smile. "Hand me a mug."

Juliette picked one up and gave it to him. He took a slow sip and let the flavor settle on his tongue. It tasted so damn good he sighed in delight. It was a nice beef broth with a hint of onion and sage. She'd said both were for him. If that was true when would she find sustenance? "Have you eaten?"

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I've had plenty to eat."

He sipped more broth and stared at her over the rim of the mug. "What are you not telling me?" She was acting rather evasive.

“Nothing,” she replied a little too fast.

Grayson narrowed his gaze and said, “I’m not a dimwitt. Tell me now.”

Juliette fidgeted a moment and then moved toward the chair. She picked up the tray and set it on the bed beside him. Grayson downed the contents of the mug in his hand and set it on the tray. He picked the other one up and took a drink. He waited patiently, or as much as he was able to, for her to speak. She had a confession, or an idiotic notion, and it would take her a moment or two to divulge it. As a child she’d done something similar. It was rather nice to see some things didn’t change.

“It hasn’t escaped me that you’d not have been hurt if not for me,” she finally said. “If you don’t want to go through with the marriage, I understand. In fact, I think we should return to London. Maybe I can try reasoning with my father.”

Grayson clenched the mug tightly in his hand. Where did she get these hare-brained ideas from? It wasn’t her fault the wheel broke on the carriage. “Did you sabotage the wheel?”

“Of course not.” She snorted. “Why would I do that?”

“Then I fail to see how you’re to blame for any of this.” He took another sip of the broth and waited. She’d have some outlandish reason, and it might prove entertaining—if this whole line of thinking hadn’t already angered him beyond reason.

“That still doesn’t negate my culpability,” she said. “You would be at home, warm in your own bed if I hadn’t sought your help.” She bit her bottom lip. “You could’ve died, Gray. If that had happened, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I’m fine,” he said. “This all could’ve happened at any moment. Don’t bother saying what you planned on spouting off next. We’re continuing on to Scotland. You’re going to be my wife and you best adapt to the idea. I keep my promises.”

“If you’re sure,” she said. “I still think there’s time to go back.”

He finished the broth and set the mug aside. “Jules, you must realize there’s no turning back. You’re thoroughly compromised. Not only were you in my home unchaperoned, but we’ve been alone in my carriage for hours, and I don’t know how long in this room. Accept your fate—you will be mine forever and always.”

For the first time since she’d shown up at his home the idea of spending the rest of his life with her by his side—felt right. A weight lifted and he realized he’d been wrong. She’d always been the light in his life. He could be better for her and would be.

“You’re right,” she agreed.

“How about that.” He laughed. “Twice in less than a day you’re agreeing with me, or has it been more than that. Keep it up and it will

be a habit you're unable to break."

She smiled. "Unlikely, but I do have enough intelligence to realize when I'm wrong."

"Come here, Jules." He patted the bed. "Lay down beside me and rest. In the morning we begin our trip again."

His soon to be duchess didn't argue. She picked up the tray and set it back on the chair, then crawled beside him on the bed. He pulled her into his arms and she nestled against him. Her head rested on his chest, and she fell fast asleep. For a moment, everything seemed right in the world, and Grayson started to believe happy endings were possible.

Chapter 7

Their trip to Scotland had started all right, was side-lined slightly by a broken wheel, and then resumed without much ado. They'd been back on the road for several days with non-stop travel. Each day had blended into the next. It was hard to tell where one ended and the other started. Perhaps Grayson should have kept better track, and if he'd have to guess it had been over four days inside the coach with Juliette, but honestly it had stopped mattering to him. The end result would still culminate to one thing—they standing together reciting marriage vows.

They didn't stop at an inn overnight again, but they did take small breaks. The horses were changed on a regular basis, and they stretched their legs, or took care of other needs during the process. After the delay with the wheel Grayson hadn't wanted to stop unless it was essential. Something niggled at the bottom of his stomach. He fully believed if they dallied too much they'd not make it to Gretna Green in time.

Juliette believed her father didn't have any idea where she may have gone, and he might not. He didn't want to take any needless chances. She was going to be his wife. Once he made up his mind there was no turning back. That ridiculousness of a name only marriage wasn't happening either. He'd inform her of that when it mattered—on their wedding night.

"I've never been so tired of staring at the inside of a carriage in my life," Juliet complained. "Surely we must be close to Scotland by now."

He didn't blame her one bit. The journey to Scotland's border was long and tedious, and cold as hell in the middle of the winter months. The further they traveled inland the more frigid it seemed to get too. "It won't be long. We should arrive at Gretna Green by nightfall."

"This isn't how I imagined Christmastide to be," she said quietly. "Not that I've had an enjoyable one in a long time."

The last carefree Christmastide he'd experienced was his final one with her. Sure he'd had fun and gave a good resemblance of reveling in the festivities, but his heart hadn't been in it. None of it had ever compared to his childhood—back when he'd been too young for his father to take notice of them. Sometimes he longed for that ignorance. It had been a much simpler time.

"When was the last time Christmastide was worth remembering for you?" He wondered if it was the same time as his. Probably not, but if so they'd have that in common. Although Grayson hoped it wasn't true. He'd wanted her to go on and have many happy times without him.

"The last one that was perfect was with you," she said. "I did have good ones after that. They weren't the same without you, but my mother did her best to make everything around her bright. She was a good woman."

"You miss her." It was a statement more than a question. Of course she'd miss her mother. The countess had been a wonderful woman. It was more than making things bright as Juliette had put it. She was kind and generous to all around her. "She wouldn't want you to be forlorn. I know it's hard, but try to remember the times you were happiest."

She remained quiet and pensive. "Her death was sudden and I didn't have a chance to say goodbye. One day we were planning which balls to attend, and the next she breathed no more." Juliette fidgeted in the seat next to him. "I'm not sure what happened. We were in the sitting room, her face turned red, and she started to rub her arm. Soon after that, she collapsed."

"It had to be difficult to watch," he said quietly. He wasn't entirely sure how his father died and hadn't cared to ask. His mother had barely managed to reach him in time to inform him of his father's death—not that it had mattered much in the end. Grayson had been summoned to return and attend the farce of a funeral his mother arranged at Kissinger Castle. The man who'd sired him hadn't respected him, and therefore Grayson hadn't seen any reason to attend the ceremony honoring his life. His mother still held that against him. She'd called him an ungrateful wretch, and he couldn't argue with her on that assessment. At the very least he *was* a wretch, and hadn't given a damn. He'd not mourned his father, and sure as hell didn't miss the rotten bastard.

"It was," she said. "But it was years ago. I don't wish to dwell on it. You're right, she wouldn't want me to be sad."

The carriage rolled to a stop. Grayson peeked out the window to check out their surroundings. They halted in front of an inn. "It appears we've arrived. Come let's see if we can let rooms for the night

and then see who can perform the ceremony.”

Their discussion had taken a turn neither one of them wished to continue. It was morbid and not generally a topic brought up before pending nuptials. Of course most couples on the brink of marriage weren't as melancholy as they'd been. What kind of marriage would they have at this rate? They barely knew each other, and what they did was a piece of their childhood they were probably better off forgetting. Grayson hadn't believed marriage would suit him. It was part of the reason he'd been so adverse to it. The other was he hadn't cared if the ducal line continued. He came from a long line of mean-spirited males. What if he had a son and he was worse than his father had been. Not that Grayson was much better—he'd taken a different path, but it hadn't exactly been decent and caring.

Grayson stepped out of the carriage and then turned to help Juliette out. She placed her gloved hand in his. It was a trusting gesture one born of familiarity. “I'm exhausted. I think when I'm finally able to lay down and sleep in truth it will be for a whole sennight.”

He laughed. “I'll be right next to you. It sounds glorious.”

They walked into the inn and were greeted by the owner. “How may I help you?”

“We need two of your best rooms,” he demanded.

The man moved around restlessly. “I'm sorry but we're full up. We've only one room available.”

Of course there was. By the time he planned on sharing it with Juliet they should be man and wife, but he'd hope to give her some privacy. Especially as he'd not explained how he'd decided to no longer have a marriage in name only. He craved to touch her, make love to her, and make her his in every way possible. Grayson was rather proud of his restraint thus far. He'd been the proper gentleman and hadn't even kissed her. Though he'd give anything to touch his lips to hers.

She touched his arm with her hand. He turned and met her gaze. “One room will be fine,” she said reassuringly. “We can make do.”

He nodded. “Can you direct us to the local parishioner?”

“You're wanting to wed?” The innkeeper grinned. “It is a common occurrence here. We've plenty Englishman bringing their intendeds to elope. The smithy can perform the ceremony.”

“The smithy?” he raised an eyebrow.

“Aye,” the innkeeper said. “He's a fine set up for weddings. Has everything a couple needs to make the deed legal.”

That was what they needed more than anything. To make sure the wedding was legal and binding. If Juliette's father hoped to challenge the match they had to do everything right. Though as a duke, Grayson

had a better chance of winning a battle over the legitimacy of his marriage. His name held power, and it was the only thing he was grateful to his father for. It gave him the means to protect Juliette, and he'd take anything within his grasp to ensure that.

"Please direct us to his location," Grayson replied, "And then inform my servant where he can deliver our trunks." He started to walk away with Juliette's arm tucked under his arm, but then stopped. "Can you have a hot bath set up as well."

"Very well, my lord."

"I'm the Duke of Kissinger," Grayson replied. "If everything meets my requirements you will be well rewarded."

"I will ensure it myself," he bowed. "Your Grace."

Grayson led Juliette out of the inn, intending to head straight to the smithy. The sooner they married, the more relaxed he could be. This whole trip had made him overly anxious. Her safety was up to him. If he failed her he'd never forgive himself.

"Pardon me, Your Grace," his driver said. "There's something you should know."

He stopped and met his driver's gaze. "What is it?"

"While I was inquiring about stabling the carriage and our mounts I overheard something."

The man was wearing his patience thin. At the rate he was delivering his news they'd freeze in place. "Let me escort Juliette to the smithy's place of business, and then you can explain it to me. I don't want her standing in the cold."

He nodded. "Please hurry, it's urgent."

Grayson nodded and headed in the direction of the smithy. "You're shaking."

"It's cold," she replied.

"You're not scared are you?" She'd been brave up until this point. Marriage was an important and life altering step. Was she having second thoughts? He hoped not. They'd both made a decision and they were sticking to it. Soon she'd be his duchess in every way. His body ached to join with hers. "There's no turning back now."

"I'm not afraid," she replied. "It really is cold."

He nodded. The more time he spent in Scotland, albeit only a short distance over the border, he hated it. The frigid weather was enough to freeze his bollocks off. He had to take her word for it that it was the chilly temperature causing her to shake. They stopped at a nearby building, and he knocked on the door. It creaked open slowly. A rather rotund man greeted them merrily. "Are you two seeking to be married?"

"We do," Grayson replied. "Can you assist us?"

"Aye," he replied. "Please come in. My daughter and her husband

can act as witnesses.” He moved aside to allow them to enter. “My name is Elliot.”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Elliot,” Juliette replied. “Thank you so much for letting us intrude on your evening.”

“Think nothing of it lass,” he said. “You’re not the first to do so, and I expect you won’t be the last.”

Grayson’s impatience was running deep. He wanted this done, along with the conversation with his driver. What had the man believed so damn important to interrupt him on the way to his wedding. He wasn’t prone to dramatics so it had to be vital. The sooner the ceremony was over the more relaxed he would be.

“Will this take long?” Grayson asked.

“Not at all,” the plump man said. He smiled wide, and then a jolly laugh rippled out of him. His wide beard matched his hair almost exactly. He wore dark red trousers and a pearly white shirt. His waist coat matched his trousers, save for some white trim. “Clara, Fergus,” he called out. “We’ve a wedding you need to witness.”

A woman with pale blond hair and a stunning countenance entered the room. “Fergus will be back soon. He had to run to the inn with a delivery. Is there anything you need me to do before we begin?”

“Aye, grab me a spot of ribbon from your sewing kit.”

“I’ve found a ribbon for you father,” Clara said. She walked over and handed it to Elliot.

A stout man with bright red hair entered the room. “It’s a bonny day for a wedding.” His cheerfulness was almost contagious. “Clara tells me you two are here to get hitched.”

“Yes,” Juliette said. “We’ve traveled for days. I can’t wait for our marriage to begin.”

Grayson couldn’t agree more. “I’m the Duke of Kissinger,” he introduced himself. “You must be Clara’s husband, Fergus.”

“Ah you’re one of those grand lords the English like to boast about,” he nodded. “And, aye, I’m Fergus.”

Grayson nodded at him. “Now that everyone is accounted for. Will you please perform the ceremony now?”

Elliot didn’t answer him immediately. He tinkered around the room until he gathered everything he’d been searching for. He placed all the items on a small table. He set a candle on the table and gestured for them to join him. “All right let’s see if we have everything we need to perform your ceremony.” He tapped the candle, a quill, a nearby book, and the bright blue ribbon, then turned toward them. “Will you be giving the lass a ring.”

He’d forgotten about the betrothal ring. Grayson reached in his inside pocket and pulled out a velvet pouch. With a quick movement he untied a string and dumped it into Elliot’s outstretched palm. The

gems sparkled in the candlelight. Juliette's gaze remained riveted on it. She glanced up at him, surprise shining out of her eyes.

“Now we are ready to begin...”

Chapter 8

The ring glistened in Elliot's hand. She was mesmerized by the sparkling gems. What had made Grayson think she needed something so extravagant? It was lovely, but too much. Her heart thudded inside her chest. This was it—they were about to join themselves together in marriage. Was it a mistake? A part of her wondered if it all would have turned out differently if they'd continued as friends. Maybe they weren't supposed to find their way back to each other. When she was with him it felt so right. She glanced up at him and relaxed. His focus was on Elliot and his preparations for the wedding ceremony. He didn't seem concerned about anything. Doubts were bound to cross her mind from time to time. It was human nature, but she suppressed them. Juliette wanted to spend the rest of her days with Grayson. He was the only man she'd ever had a connection with.

"Before we begin," Elliot said. "I'll need you to remove your gloves."

Juliette stared down at her hands. At least it was warm in the smithy's home, but she felt naked without them. She didn't want to remove them. Grayson picked up one of her hands and said, "Let me."

He slowly unbuttoned the end and peeled one glove off. His touch sent shivers up her arm. She suppressed the need to shiver as tingles filled her belly. After he finished removing the glove he set it aside and repeated the action with the other one. When he was done with his task he let go of her hand. She immediately missed his warmth and wanted to beg him to touch her again.

"Now I need you both to join me in front of this table. Face me and follow my lead." Elliot motioned for them to come forward. He picked up the ribbon Clara had brought to him. He held it in front of him fully stretched out. It was a long thin piece of blue silk. With careful precision he created a small loop on one end, and then pulled the right side through, repeating the action several times. Juliette lost track of how many times he pulled the strip through. After he was

done he presented it to them.

“This knot represents love. True love ties us in a way that we can never escape from. It is all encompassing, binding, and integrates deep within our soul. We live and breathe it as it becomes an integral part of us.” The knot had somehow formed the shape of a heart as he adjusted it. “Your heart beats for the other person, and vice versa. Life without them is unimaginable.” He began working the other side of the ribbon, forming another intricate knot.

Juliette watched in amazement as he worked the fabric to his will. She didn’t fully understand the symbolism this one represented, but it fascinated her. Having something else to keep her focus on helped to calm her anxiety, and let her emotions shine through in a different way. She turned her head and glanced up at Grayson. Yes, they were meant to be together, now and forever. She shouldn’t question the how or why of anything.

“This knot represents eternity,” He explained. “Two souls who wish to spend out their lives together join both love and their lifespan as one.” Elliot gestured toward Grayson and Juliette. “Please face each other.”

Grayson turned toward her. She met his gaze willingly and she melted inside. It was filled with heat, and promise. What that promise entailed she wasn’t entirely sure but she wanted to find out. Elliot lifted her hand and had her hold it palm up, then did the same with Grayson’s. He placed the heart knot in her palm. “The woman is the heart of the relationship. A man learns to love by following her lead. She willingly gives her love freely and without expectations. It’s a gift a man cannot refuse, even if he desires to.” He placed the eternity knot in Grayson’s palm. “The man is tasked with caring for that gift for an infinite amount of time. Nothing is too great a task to keep the woman’s love whole and strong. Protection keeps them together through all of life’s perils. Whether it be times of joy or sadness it will remain. Giving and receiving equally, love will see you both through life.” Elliot turned to light the candle on the table. “An eternal flame to join two hearts, one love, and a lifetime together.”

Juliette stared down at the knots resting in their palms. She never imagined a wedding ceremony such as this one. When they set out to Scotland she thought it would be a quick do you take this man to be your husband, and an equally fast assent. This was rather romantic... She hoped Grayson wasn’t panicking about it. Outwardly he remained calm and focused on what Elliot was saying. The smithy couldn’t have known this wasn’t a love match—at least not on Grayson’s part. She’d always loved him, but she feared he wasn’t capable of loving anyone. He’d had a hard life and that made him skeptical of anything that wasn’t tangible. Love couldn’t be measured or seen; it had to be taken

on faith. Juliette would give him enough love that maybe over time he'd accept it and learn how to love her in return. She wanted a real marriage, but didn't know how to tell him that. Sometime after the ceremony she'd express her wishes.

He picked up the ring and said. "This ring is an outward symbol of your desire to bring your two lives together." He placed the ring in Grayson's palm next to the eternity knot. "May fate be with you always and bless you, and may you be poor in hardships and rich in blessings, more importantly may you both know nothing but happiness."

Grayson stared down at the ring. She didn't know what was going on inside of his head, but she prayed it was all good things. He lifted his head and met her gaze. His lips lifted upward into a reassuring smile.

Elliot turned toward Grayson and said, "Repeat after me: I, Grayson Abbot, the Duke of Kissinger, take thee Lady Juliette Brooks as my wife."

Grayson said the words to her. His voice didn't waver once; the rich timber filled her ears and put all her fears at ease. He repeated every word Elliot demanded of him and didn't flinch once. The entire time he kept his focus on her as if he somehow realized she needed him to. Warmth spread through her entire body as she realized soon the ceremony would be over and she'd be his.

"Very good, lad," Elliot praised him. "Now it's the lass's turn." He turned toward Juliette and said, "Repeat after me: I, Lady Juliette Brooks, take thee, Grayson Abbot, The Duke of Kissinger, as my husband..."

Juliette followed Grayson's lead. She kept her voice strong and steady as she repeated her vows. Her focus remained firm and solely on him. He was hers from that point and for always. Protection went both ways. She intended to make sure he never doubted how wonderful he was. Too her, he was everything and always had been. She'd prove to him he could always count on her. His love was worth fighting for and she'd not stop until he admitted he couldn't live without her. She didn't realize how much she needed him to love her until that moment. Over the years she'd had to learn how to be patient. That skill would be to her benefit while she sought to win his heart. They had a lifetime together, and she'd not waste one minute of it.

"Now lad," Elliot said. "Pick up the ring and place it on her finger." He gestured toward Juliette's free hand. "And say, with this ring I thee wed."

Grayson slid it on her finger and repeated the words, claiming her as his with one final gesture. He kept her hand in his and looked up at

Elliot expectantly.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," he said triumphantly." He placed his hand over the center of the ribbon joined across their two palms. "This is your symbol to keep your love strong. Keep the ribbon safe, and your love will endure." He glanced up at Grayson and said, "You may kiss your bride."

She expected a kiss, craved it. This was her one and only chance to have his lips on hers. Grayson made it clear their marriage wouldn't be a real one. So if he didn't kiss her now—she'd never have one. He picked up the ribbon and folded it carefully, then placed it inside his coat pocket. He turned toward her and smiled. He lifted her hand and kissed the bare back. Tiny sparks of sensation spread through her at the touch of his lips on her. It wasn't what she wanted though, it wasn't a true kiss. This was his way of setting the path their marriage was to take. She had to figure out a way to have him kiss her for real. Not this chivalrous way, it wasn't who he was... What happened to the rake and seducer he was rumored to be? She wanted that Grayson to come out to play.

"That's it?" She raised an eyebrow. "I expected much more than that."

He didn't bother to reply. His attention turned to Elliot. "Are we done?"

"Not quite yet," Elliot replied. "I need to fill out the registry and have you both sign it, along with Clara and Fergus." He gestured for them toward a chair. "Take a seat while I finish up."

Elliot picked up the quill and ink and opened the book. It seemed like he wrote forever before he gestured toward Clara and Fergus to come to him. They each took their turn at the book signing their name to the registry. Juliette fidgeted waiting for her turn to sign the book. Her feet bounced underneath her skirts with anxiety. This had to be completed so proof would remain of their marriage. Without it the union could be challenged. She would remain anxious until it was completed.

"It's your turn lass," Elliot motioned for her to join him. "Sign here." He pointed to a spot on the page. She picked up the quill and placed her signature on the line. A sense of relief went through her as Grayson joined her and signed it as well. It was official—they were husband and wife.

"Thank you," Grayson said. He pulled out enough to pay him for the service. "The ceremony was lovely."

"If there is time, I believe in doing it right. The two of you appear to love each other deeply, and deserved a real wedding." He picked up a piece of parchment and handed it to Grayson. "This is a marriage certificate. In case it's needed. If you need me to verify any of it please

let me know.”

Grayson nodded and turned toward Juliette, “Well, Your Grace.” His lips tilted upward. “I believe that’s our cue to let these lovely people enjoy their evening in peace. Let’s go back to the inn and rest. I believe you promised I could sleep a whole night through.”

She laughed. “That’s not how I recall it.”

“Oh?” He lifted a brow. Grayson opened the smithy’s door and helped her outside. “Then please tell me what you said.”

“I don’t believe I mentioned you having a whole night of sleep, you decided to join me as I fell into that blissful state.”

This was the side of Grayson she enjoyed. He was happy, carefree, and playful. Maybe the rake would join her in bed that evening—for more than a good night’s rest. For their marriage to be indisputable they should consummate it. Perhaps she should point that out.

“I believe you’re correct,” he agreed. “It’s good of you to allow me to encroach on your plans.”

They strolled toward the inn and stopped when they noticed the driver waving at them. “Didn’t he have something important to tell you?”

Grayson nodded. “I’ll speak with him. Go inside the inn and have the innkeeper show you to our room.” He kissed the top of her head. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Juliette nodded and went inside. She found the innkeeper immediately and he had one of the maids escort her to her room. A steaming hot bath greeted her. An idea formed in her head, one that should get Grayson’s attention. Maybe this was his plan all along... If he were to find her in her bath it would be a good excuse to abandon his declaration of a name only marriage. Who was she to deny him that excuse? After all she wanted to make love to him and have a real marriage.

Juliette removed her attire and stepped into the bath. It shouldn’t be too long before he returned...

Chapter 9

Grayson waited for Juliette to go inside before he approached

the driver. He didn't want to give her any reason to worry. The driver was practically bounding on the heels of his feet. Whatever news he had to impart was dire enough to make the man anxious. That couldn't be good.

"What is the problem?" he asked.

"There are men here searching for Lady Juliette," he replied. "They were questioning the stable hands."

It was as he expected. Her father had leaped to the conclusion Juliette had ran away to marry. At least he could rest easy with the actual ceremony over. Although it hadn't been consummated, and that technicality could give her father room to question the validity of the marriage. His ridiculous demand it be a marriage in name only was coming back to haunt him. How was he to explain this to his new wife? He'd wanted to change the nature of their marriage, but had hoped to ease her into the idea. She was exhausted from their journey and now he had to be a cad and demand his right to bed her. It was either that or battle her father every step of the way. He'd not take that chance with Juliette's life. It was clear her father had no idea what was best for her or he'd not have sought to tie her to Lord Payne.

"Is it only her they are seeking, or do they realize she is traveling with me?"

The more information he had the better his chances were of protecting her. Afterwards he'd go up to their room and try to explain it all to her. She deserved the truth, and he'd make sure he was always honest with her. He was far from perfect, but for her he'd make an effort to be what she needed. When she came to him for help he'd scoffed at the idea. Now he couldn't imagine a better fate for him. The wedding ceremony had taken him aback at first. It was more meaningful than he expected from an elopement to Gretna Green. The smithy had a romantic heart or perhaps he saw more than either

Grayson or Juliette did. Was there a chance they could find love together? The idea of such an emotion hadn't ever occurred to him. Love was for other people, not him.

"No, Your Grace," the driver said. "They assume she is with a man, but the identity of him is unknown. They are focusing their queries to her description and saying she may be with a man."

"Good," he replied. "If they question you attempt to steer them in a different direction. I don't want them disturbing us tonight. I will deal with everything in the morning. My wife deserves a night free from worry and to rest."

"Very well, Your Grace." He nodded. "Will you need anything else from me tonight?"

"No," he said. "Don't hesitate to let me know if there is something requiring my attention before morning. If all else fails err on the side of caution. My wife's safety is my upmost concern." What if it wasn't her father looking for her? He still found it odd Lord Payne had been willing to marry Juliette. What had he gained from the match? If it had been important to him he'd want to prevent her from marrying elsewhere. "While you're looking into it find out who it is exactly that is searching for my wife. I assume it's her father, but I don't want any surprises."

He nodded. "I will keep vigilant on the matter."

"Goodnight," Grayson said. "Have the carriage ready at first light. The sooner we leave for home the better. I hope to avoid any entanglements and arrive at my country seat without any incident."

The driver nodded and headed toward the stable, where he'd bed down for the evening. Grayson returned his attention to the inn. Juliette waited for him in their room. He wasn't sure if he should return to her side now, or give her more time to prepare for bed. He'd ordered a bath for her and she should be taking advantage of it. If he returned too soon he might interrupt her, and as much as he'd like to see her in all her glory—he didn't want to embarrass her either. He respected her too much to take advantage of her, or the situation.

He'd always cared about Juliette, and he supposed he'd loved her in his own way. Albeit, not in a romantic sense, but perhaps he'd been wrong. Maybe that was why he'd always kept tabs on her. He'd wanted to have some connection to her even if he believed he couldn't have her himself. Now that she belonged to him he refused to ever let her go. She might be all right with having a real marriage. He hoped so anyway, especially as she wasn't the one who'd foolishly demanded it. She'd probably expected to share a bed with him. It was a risk she'd been willing to take by asking him to marry her. No doubt it was one of the things she weighed her choices against.

Dawdling outside wasn't helping him make any decisions. He

should go inside the inn and at least get warm in the main room. After that he could make a decision to join her immediately, or wait until he believed she'd fallen asleep. He stepped through the entrance and was grateful for the heat that welcomed him. The innkeeper greeted him as soon as he noticed his entrance.

"Your wife is settled in your chamber. Would you like me to have a maid show you to your room?" he asked.

"Not yet," he replied. "Can you have a meal sent up?"

"Yes, Your Grace," he said. "We have a mutton stew and bread. It's not much..."

"It'll do," he replied. "Send up something warm to drink as well, and I'll have a mug of ale now in the common room."

The innkeeper nodded. "Aye, Your Grace," he replied. "Let me know when you'd like to be shown up to your room. For now I'll have a maid bring your wife a meal."

Satisfied he'd done his duty and ensured Juliette would be taken care of he headed into the main room. He found a seat near the hearth and reveled in the warmth. A few moments later a server brought him a mug of ale. He still hadn't decided if he was going to join Juliette after her bath or much later. By his estimation he still had time to make a decision. Ladies took their time with their ablutions.

He took a sip of his ale and almost spit it back in the cup. It was a watered down mess that barely made it fit to consume. Grayson stared at the contents and considered his option: finish the ale, set it aside and ignore it, or just give in and find his room. It was where he wanted to be.

"What brings you to Scotland of all places? Please tell me you're not here to elope. You've sworn off marriage as long as I've known you."

Grayson turned and found Lord Payne standing directly behind him. He was at a loss for words, and really hated his assumption had been correct. The viscount had a reason for wanting Juliette—one he feared he'd not like much.

"Marriage isn't for everyone," Grayson replied evasively. "Although I have friends who swear by it."

Lord Payne laughed. "I should've known you wouldn't be caught in the parson's trap." He clapped him on the shoulder. "Now, I believe marriage will suit me fine. As soon as I take care of some unfinished business here I'm heading to London to sign a betrothal contract."

That was good news of a sort. He hadn't signed the contract yet so he had no legal claim on Juliette. It was something he could work with. Since he wasn't officially tied to her, the viscount couldn't demand he take her back to her father. Grayson, as her husband, could legally tell him to go to hell.

“What business do you have here?”

Grayson had an idea why the viscount was in Gretna Green, but he wanted a confirmation. Juliette was his to protect, and Payne was the reason they’d rushed to Scotland to be married. If he was looking for her it couldn’t be a good thing.

“My intended ran away from home. As I was close to the border her father asked me to see if she headed in this direction. I’ve been here a couple of days and she hasn’t made an appearance. She must have gone elsewhere.”

Did the man not wonder why Juliette would have run away? It had to be a clue that she didn’t desire the match, and yet he was here searching for her. “You sure you want a wife who has a penchant for disappearing?”

“She’ll come around after we’re wed. All women are rebellious at first.” He laughed maniacally. “They need a firm hand to tame them. I know how to handle her. Don’t worry about me—I’m rather looking forward to it.”

Grayson had an idea how he planned on bringing his intended to heel. The viscount’s penchant for beating his lovers was well known in certain circles. He’d been banned from a few of the more prominent establishments for that very reason. It was those clubs that Grayson learned of the man’s more sadistic tastes. One of the women had been beaten so bad she nearly died.

He’d told Juliette he’d not marry her at first, but one mention of the viscount and his heart froze in his chest. No woman deserved to find themselves the subject of Lord Payne’s attention, but Juliette wasn’t just anyone to him. She’d been his best friend when he was denied any close attachments. The very fact she’d come to him for help should’ve been enough. It shouldn’t have taken Lord Payne’s name rolling off her tongue to gain his notice. The viscount would never come near her. He’d make sure of it one way or the other. At least Payne was giving up on finding her in Scotland. Perhaps he would depart before them. Grayson would ensure Juliette stayed in their room either until Payne left, or their carriage was ready for them.

“You must want to marry her a great deal if you’re here looking for her.” Grayson drew his brows together. “What do you get out of this marriage? It can’t be a love match if she’s off hiding from it.”

Not to mention it wouldn’t exactly be a cordial environment after the wedding...

“She is to inherit some substantial property, it was part of her mother’s dowry,” he said. “There was a stipulation in the contracts it must be passed onto one of her children. Unfortunately she only had a daughter—so it became the selling point in marrying her off. I’m

rather short on funds and with the income from the property and the yearly stipend I should sit nicely.”

“Gah, I can’t imagine having to marry for money.” Grayson shuddered. “You poor sod.”

Whatever woman he married would be the one Grayson would feel sorry for. He was glad he was able to save Juliette from that fate.

“Well, we all can’t have the money you do,” he said. “We do what we have to survive.”

“I wish you luck finding your bride-to-be,” Grayson said evenly. He didn’t want Payne to know how disgusted he was with him. “It’s been a long day, and the ale is rather hideous. I’m off to retire for the evening.”

Grayson stood and turned to leave. He didn’t take a step before the viscount caught his attention.

“You never did say why you were here,” Lord Payne said.

He cursed inwardly. How was he to explain why he was at Gretna Green of all places? There weren’t too many reasons for an Englishman to be in the Scottish border town, and all of them resolved around marriage one way or the other. He should be there to either prevent a marriage, or to have one performed. Should he tell Payne the truth? Would he even believe it?

“No, I didn’t.” Grayson said. His lips lifted into a cocky smile. “And I don’t believe I owe you an explanation either. My reasons are my own.” He tilted his head slightly. “Good night, Payne.”

Grayson didn’t want to wait around and leave Payne room to interrogate him further. The sooner he put distance between them the better. The only problem he could see is he had no clue where his room was. Why had he decided to lounge around in the main room? He should have gone upstairs immediately. So much for allowing Juliette some space...

He found a serving girl and asked for directions to his room. She gestured for him to follow and led him to his chamber. “Thank you,” he said, and entered.

Grayson shouldn’t have worried about disturbing Juliette. She was fast asleep already on top of the bed, and hadn’t even bothered to climb underneath the blankets. At least she’d been able to find a nightgown in the trunk he’d had his staff prepare for her. He lifted her gently and rolled the blanket down beneath her, then placed her back on the bed to spread it over top of her. Damn she was beautiful, even more so in her sleep.

A flash of light caught his attention. He pushed the top of her nightgown over slightly to reveal a gold chain. It seemed familiar... Grayson lifted it and gasped as recognition hit. It was the locket he’d given her at their final Christmas together. She’d kept it—he hadn’t

expected her to. All right perhaps he believed she'd tossed it in a box and forgotten about it, but never would he have believed she still wore it.

What did it mean?

In the morning he'd have to ask her. It could be he was reading too much into the gesture, but in his heart he hoped it meant they had a future together. For now he'd lay beside her and rest. Tomorrow was soon enough to begin their future together.

Chapter 10

Juliette rolled onto her side and hit a solid mass. What was in her bed? She'd been dreaming of her last Christmas with Grayson. It had been lovely and it warmed her from the inside out. If they could capture that feeling and hold onto it tightly she'd never feel lonely ever again.

At least until reality reared its ugly head. She opened her eyes and found him asleep next to her. When had he come back? She'd given up on him returning while she was in her bath. It had gotten cold too fast, and on the trip to Scotland she'd found she'd abhorred any frigid temperature. There had been two trunks waiting in the room along with her bath. Grayson had mentioned the last time they'd stayed at an inn he'd arranged for her to have clothing. This was her first opportunity to rummage through the trunks offerings. She'd sighed in relief to find a clean dressing gown, and a brush. As much as she wanted to wait for him to return her exhaustion overtook her. She only meant to lay down for a moment, and that was the last thing she recalled.

Grayson must have come back and found her fast asleep. He'd probably been relieved. Did he expect she'd demand he make her his wife in truth? They were legally wed, but he'd never love her. Not in any way that mattered. She'd like to have children some day, and he apparently hadn't cared if she took a lover. Somehow she doubted he'd been truthful then. There had been a strange gleam in his eye that made her wonder what he'd really been thinking, but hadn't wanted to press the issue.

Now that they were wed, she'd push harder. She wasn't sure how to make him see that marriage to her would make him happy. Somehow she'd have to find the patience to see it all through. Juliette was determined to persevere.

"Good morning," he said huskily. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," she replied. Her cheeks warmed. They'd been in each

other's company for days, but somehow this seemed more intimate. They'd never awoken beside each other in a bed before.

He lifted his hand and ran it down her side, and rested it on her hip. "We need to talk, but it can wait until we're dressed. Do you want me to give you privacy?"

What could they have to discuss? The marriage was done. He'd not made love to her, and it didn't appear he planned to. Maybe there was something they had to talk about. What was their next step? Would they return to London or to his country seat? How was she going to explain all of this to her father?

"You can stay," she said. Juliette lowered her gaze. She didn't want him to see how nervous she was. "There's a privacy screen I can make use of."

He lifted her chin and forced her to look in his eyes. "You don't need to hide from me." Grayson lowered his hand and skimmed his fingers across her neck. It rested on the gold chain she always wore. Juliette blushed and started to move away. How could she have forgotten she was wearing it? She'd been so careful to keep the locket hidden—hadn't wanted him to realize how much he still meant to her.

"Don't pull away," he demanded. His fingers skimmed the chain and he pulled the locket into his palm. He pressed the latch and it slipped open with a slight click. Inside he'd find the miniature portrait of him as a boy. If she'd been able to update it to a more recent one she would have. It was enough to have a piece of him resting against her heart every day. "Why do you still wear this?"

There was a small hitch in his voice—it cracked a little as he asked the question. Did it bother him she still had the locket? "It's a piece of my past that I don't want to forget. A happier time that I'll never have again."

"What if you could?" He pulled her into his arms and rested his forehead against hers. His eyes remained closed. She didn't know what he was asking of her, none of it made sense. What did the locket have to do with anything? He pulled back and his eyelids fluttered open. "You smell so good. I want nothing more than to kiss you—taste you the way I've been craving since the first time I saw the woman you'd grown into."

"That was days ago. What's been stopping you?"

He shook his head. "That wasn't the first time I saw you in the past fifteen years."

When had he seen her? She didn't go out in society, and hadn't since before her mother died. Even then it had been a mere two weeks, and except for her come out ball she'd hugged the wall. No one had wanted to be her friend. The gentlemen were nicer at her first official ball. Since it had been thrown in her honor she'd had plenty of

dance partners.

"I don't understand," she said. "If you saw me why didn't you come and talk to me. I'd have loved to have had some time with you. Where was this?"

Grayson didn't answer right away. She didn't know why he was holding back, and she was a fool. He'd said he wanted to kiss her and she'd stupidly turned into an inquisitor instead of demanding he put his lips on hers. Now she'd have to wait even longer to find out if it was as wonderful as she'd imagined.

"I was invited to your ball," he finally said. "My father forbade me to go. He did that a lot while he was alive." Grayson closed his eyes again and sighed. "He didn't like how close we'd become. I was usurping the plans he had for me, and he was making sure I followed the path he set for me. That's why I had to stay away from you, but I couldn't resist seeing you. I didn't know when I'd have the chance again. So I sneaked inside through a back entrance—I couldn't be announced formally. I watched you dance and laugh. It hurt, but I was glad you were so happy. After that I kept my distance."

Her heart beat rapidly inside of her chest. He did care about her, and always had. This was something she had been wanting to hear for so long. Damn his father for keeping them apart. Their lives might be so different if he'd not been hell bent on controlling his son. "Kiss me," she demanded.

Grayson cupped her cheek in his hand and lowered his mouth to hers. His lips were warm and soft. It was sweet at first, but it quickly changed to something far more than that. His hand left her face and roamed down her shoulders until they rested on her hip. Juliette wanted more—of him. He pulled her against him and ran kisses down her cheek and then her neck. She squirmed in his arms simultaneously pushing at him and wanting to crawl as close to him as possible.

Kisses were marvelous things and she'd never have enough of them.

"Gray," she said breathlessly. "I love you."

He groaned and pulled her on top of him. "Don't say it if you don't mean it."

Why would she do something so heinous? "I wouldn't do that to you. You mean too much to me." She caressed his cheek. "You don't have to say it back, but I hope one day you will."

Grayson pushed his hands into her dark tresses and pulled her down to him. Their gazes were locked together, and their lips just short of touching. "You don't have to wait for me to say those words to you. I've always loved you. You've owned my heart since we were children, but what I felt for you then doesn't compare to what's in my heart now. What's between us is as real as anything out there, and I

look forward to making a lifetime of memories with you.” He closed the distance between them and kissed her again. Passion ignited between them.

Juliette lost all thought and just reveled in the feel of his body against hers. The kisses, touches, and loving were all more pleasure than she could imagine. They hadn’t had a wedding night, but Grayson made up for it with a morning she’d never forget... He made sure there would be no doubt she was his wife, and Juliette couldn’t have been happier if she tried...



Grayson should’ve waited to make love to Juliette, but he’d never been a patient man. Besides with Lord Payne hovering around the inn it was for the best. Afterwards they’d lingered in bed as long as he dared let them. The sooner they headed back to London the better. Originally he intended to take her to Kissinger, but it was better if he dealt with her father first. They couldn’t have anything being held over their head—not if they wanted to have a happy life together.

So he rolled out of bed and dressed before he was tempted to love her all over again, then he helped her with her gown. Dressing her was almost as much fun as he imagined it would be to take the gown off her. He placed kisses all over her as he buttoned it up.

Juliette laughed. “You’re rather good at this.”

“This is only the beginning, darling,” he whispered in her ear. “We have a lifetime for me to explore you, and I intend to take my husbandly duties seriously.” He brushed back her dark curls and kissed her shoulder. “Do you need help with your hair too?”

“Shoo,” she said. “I will pin my hair up myself. It will be done much faster without your attentions. Go see to the coach and have our trunks taken to the carriage.”

Grayson spun her around to face him. He leaned down and kissed her with all the love in his heart. She matched his kiss with equal fervor. When he pulled back he felt the loss of her heat, but was pleased with how plump her lips remained from their shared passion. “Something for you to think about while I’m gone.”

“You’re wicked,” she said breathlessly. “I like this side of you. I’m glad you’re mine.”

He kissed her forehead and said. “Stay here until I come and get

you. It is safer for you here.”

She scrunched up her nose. “What danger could possibly be lurking in the inn?”

“Jules...”

She held up her hand and interrupted him. “Don’t bother telling me about protecting me and all that nonsense. It’s going to take me a while to pin my hair up anyway. I’m sure by the time the horses are hitched to the carriage and the trunks ready to be loaded I’ll be finished with it. So go take care of business and leave me be.”

He didn’t bother arguing with her. She was probably right. Her hair would take a while to properly fix. “Miss me while I’m gone.”

“Always,” she said.

Grayson left her to her task and went down to the main room. He left the inn and went to the stable first. The carriage hadn’t been outside and he wanted to find out what the delay was. He found his driver inside wrestling with one of the horses.

“Will the carriage be ready soon?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” he replied. “One of the horses went lame and I had to trade her for a new mount. He’s being a little feisty about joining the team. I’ll have him ready soon enough. The carriage should be out front at half past the hour.”

“That’s good. I’d like to leave as soon as possible. The sooner I’m out of Scotland the happier I’ll be.” He studied the horse giving the driver a hard time. “I’ll ask the innkeeper to provide some lads to help with the trunks. You have your work cut out for you with this beast.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “I appreciate it.”

Grayson nodded and left the driver to deal with harnessing the horses to the carriage. The morning had gone better than he’d hoped. Juliette loved him. As far as he was concerned all was right in the world. Soon they’d be on their way and headed back to London, albeit much slower than their journey to Scotland. No reason to rush back.

He found innkeeper immediately. He was writing something in his register. “Can you have some lads help load my trunks onto my carriage?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” he said. “I trust you had a pleasant rest?”

“I did,” he replied. “Best night sleep I’ve had in days.”

“Good.” The innkeeper beamed. “And your wife?”

“I didn’t realize you’d married,” Payne said from behind him.

Grayson closed his eyes and cursed silently. Why hadn’t he left already?

“No reason you would,” Grayson said calmly. “I didn’t shout it to the world I’d intended to wed.”

He prayed Payne didn’t ask who he’d married. If he didn’t realize Juliette was his wife he might let it go and leave him in peace. What

were the chances of that happening?

"What lucky lady did you make your duchess?"

"That would be me," Juliette said, and then glanced at Grayson. "I finished much quicker than I thought. It was boring sitting by myself. How long until we leave."

Christ. Why hadn't she stayed in the room? Maybe Payne wouldn't realize who she was. As if that was possible. Hadn't his driver mentioned he had a description of her to show people?

Payne looked at Juliet and then back at Grayson. He noticed when the realization hit the viscount. He barely managed to avoid being hit by the man's wild punch. "You bastard," he screamed. "You knew last night didn't you."

Grayson took a step back. "Jules do me a favor and go back to the room."

"What is happening?" she asked. "Why is he trying to hit you?"

"She was supposed to be mine," Payne exclaimed.

Juliette's gaze flew to the viscount, and then back at Grayson. Her mouth formed opened wide on a silent oh. That's right—he wanted to scream at her. Lord Payne had planned on marrying her, and now he planned on taking on Grayson for daring to take her away from him.

"Gentlemen," the innkeeper said. "We don't allow fighting in the inn. Take this outside immediately."

Grayson turned to Juliette and said, "Stay in here. You'll be safer." Then walked out of the inn, Viscount Payne was a short distance behind. It would be better if they didn't brawl at all, but at least outside they'd be less likely to damage any of the inn's property. Grayson walked a fair enough distance from the inn, to the side of the entrance and stopped.

"Payne," Grayson said. "We don't have to do this. I have a prior relationship with Juliette that supersedes yours." He shrugged. "Besides we both know you don't have an actual claim. You didn't sign the betrothal contract."

Payne's face turned beet red and his lips curled up in displeasure. "I should've realized last night why you were here. You wouldn't tell me, but I figured that was you being you. But now that I've had time to think about it—your estate borders her fathers. How long have you been bedding her?"

Grayson couldn't listen to him discuss Juliette's virtue in vulgar terms. She was innocent of any wrong doing, and he'd not touched her in that way until after they'd married. His fist hit Payne's face before he realized what he was doing. The viscount hit the ground with a loud thud.

Viscount Payne wiped a drop of blood from his nose, and then slowly returned to his feet. "For that I'm going to enjoy killing you."

He pulled a pistol out of his pocket and aimed it at Grayson. "You're correct. I don't have a claim—yet but that can be rectified. With you gone she'll be free once again. No need to bother with a mourning period. Her father doesn't need to know about this unfortunate turn of events."

Grayson froze and considered his options. Viscount Payne planned to murder him and return to London with Juliette as if nothing had happened. The man had lost his mind. "And what if she's already carrying my child? Are you going to claim it as your own?"

He hadn't thought about the possibility of a child. Grayson hadn't ever believed he'd be a father, but everything was different with Juliette. She made the unattainable seem possible. For her he'd fight with every breath in his body. The viscount would not have a chance to sully her in any way.

"There are ways to rid a woman of a babe." He shrugged. "If it turns out she's enceinte I'll deal with it."

Horror froze Grayson's tongue in his mouth. If he did as he proposed—it could kill Juliette, but why should he care about murdering a mother and child? Clearly the idea of ending a person's life didn't bother him as he was fully prepared to shoot Grayson. The time for thinking was at an end, and actions had to be taken to stop his evil. Grayson leapt at Payne and fought for control of the pistol. It went off, the echo ricocheting through the air. Viscount Payne's scream followed shortly after, and then he slumped to the ground in a heap, the pistol lying out of his reach.

Grayson wanted to be sorry, but he couldn't. The man had threatened him, and his wife. The constable would have to be called to handle the situation. Payne wasn't dead, but he was gravely injured. He'd go to the inn and have them take care of him. A doctor would need to be sent for. He turned to head to the inn and halted. Juliette and the innkeeper were standing not far in the distance. How long had they been watching?

"I was frightened. I didn't know it was Lord Payne you were talking to. He was the last person I expected to see here." Juliette ran to him and hugged him tight in her embrace.

That partially was his fault. He should have told her the viscount was in Scotland searching for her. A lesson learned the hard way—he'd not keep anything from her ever again. It could lead to disastrous results.

"It's all right," he said soothingly.

"Is he dead?" The innkeeper asked.

"No," Grayson shook his head. "But he might be if he doesn't get some care. Can you take care of everything for me?"

The innkeeper nodded. "Aye, I'll see to everything. The constable

will have questions, but I'll give him your direction."

"Thank you," Grayson said. "I appreciate it."

"The lass and I saw everything. The man's intentions were clear. You're entitled to defend yourself." He stared at Viscount Payne's prone form. "He got what he deserved."

Viscount Payne was capable of a lot of evil. He'd hoped to protect Juliette from it. Maybe now they could go on and not think about what the viscount might do. He would be facing the constable, and whatever charges he seemed fit. They could put the whole fiasco in the past and move forward. He hugged Juliette against him and said, "We're leaving as soon as the trunks are loaded in the carriage."

She nodded and let him lead her to their carriage, and supervised the loading of the trunks. Grayson kept her close by his side until it was time to depart. It didn't take long for the carriage to be ready. They were settled in the carriage and well on their way out of Scotland before he breathed a sigh of relief.

"You too?" She asked.

"What?"

"Viscount Payne," she shuddered. "He meant to kill you. I'm relieved to leave him behind and head home."

"I couldn't agree more," he said. "I wasn't sure I'd make it out of that situation alive, but I had to do everything I could because the alternative was unacceptable. He would have hurt you, and I couldn't allow that."

"I never want to go through that again. It's made me realize something else to." She laid her hand on his chest and met his gaze. "It's been an adventure, and while I look forward to our life together—I want to stay home for a while. I've discovered I don't particularly enjoy excitement as much as I thought I would."

"So my plans for our wedding trip to Rome are out?" He hadn't actually made any plans. Where would he have found the time? But he couldn't help teasing her. "I had high hopes of finding out if I compared to your fantasies about those gladiators."

Juliette scrunched her nose up. "Maybe one day, but as long as you're with me, I'm content. We don't need to go anywhere."

He leaned down and kissed her lightly. "My heart is happiest with you near too."

"There was a time I believed no gentlemen would want to kiss me. Wallflowers find it hard to imagine a happily-ever-after." Her whole face brightened as she met his gaze. "But now I know I was waiting for you. No other man's kiss would have been right."

He'd kiss her every day, more than once if necessary, if that was her desire. But this year would always hold a special place in his heart. It was their first one as husband and wife, and kissing Juliette

was a gift he'd always hold dear. Christmastide hadn't gone as he'd planned—it'd been so much better...

Epilogue

Grayson was sitting in his study going over some of the paperwork his steward had sent over for him to examine. So far he hadn't found anything out of the ordinary and wasn't sure why the man thought it needed his attention. He had to be missing something, but finding it was proving impossible. He'd have to leave it for another day.

Christmastide had started and he'd promised Juliette he'd spend the evening with her. It was the anniversary of their first year as husband and wife. It was a celebration he hoped to cherish every year. Not every man had the pleasure of loving his wife. Grayson considered himself lucky he'd married her. He'd almost been foolish enough to refuse.

He set the papers on his desk in a neat pile. They'd wait for him there. When the time was right he'd look them over with fresh eyes, and possibly then he'd figure out what his steward wanted him to see. He flipped through a set of invitations—only one peaked his interest. It was from his good friend the Marquis of Knightly and his wife. The invitation was for him and Juliette to attend a dinner they were holding over Christmastide. It was an intimate affair that would only have their closest friends in attendance. Grayson assumed it would include Bradford, the marchioness's brother, along with her friend Pippa and her husband. He scribbled a quick note to be delivered accepting the invite on behalf of himself, and Juliette. He couldn't wait to see his friends and hoped everyone would be there.

For now he'd go in search of Juliette. Grayson left his study and headed to the sitting room. They'd chosen to spend the season at his London townhouse. That way she could remain close to her father. The earl had been more worried about Juliette than angry, and welcomed her home with open arms. He'd been surprised she'd run away to marry Grayson. Her father hadn't realized just how opposed Juliette had been to marrying Lord Payne, and apologized for not

listening to her, and following Eloise's advice. For her part, Juliette was glad she didn't have to see her step-mother every day. There would never be any love between the two women, but they'd learn to tolerate each other for the earl's sake. Riverdale had been horrified to learn of Lord Payne's crimes. Payne survived his injury and was deported for his actions. His title had been stripped from him and given to the next person in line to inherit it. In the end it had all worked out.

When he entered the sitting room he found Juliette staring out a window. It was similar to the memory of their last Christmastide as children. She even had a similar expression on her face. Her eyes were wide, her mouth opened a touch, and her cheeks slightly reddened.

"Wishing on stars again are you?"

Juliette turned from the window and faced him. "Not many stars to see in the city." She crossed the room to him and wrapped her arms around him in an embrace. He held her against him as she laid her head on his shoulder. "Besides all my wishes have come true. What could I possibly hope to gain that I don't already have?"

He kissed the top of her head. "What did you wish for all those years ago."

She glanced up at him and met his gaze. "I wished to spend all of my days with you by my side. It took longer than I expected, but better late than never." Her lips tilted upward. "What would you have wished for."

"The same thing," he replied. "Although I'm more greedy than you. I want more."

His life was more than he could have imagined it could be, and it was all because of her. Happiness had seemed so elusive at one time in his life. Now that he had it he couldn't imagine how he'd managed without it for most of his life. There was only one thing that would make it better.

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow. "What do you want? Maybe I can give it to you."

"I'm counting on it," he replied. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Please make me a father."

She jerked back, surprise filling her eyes. He'd believed he'd make a horrible father. His own had been a terrible role model. The more time he spent with Juliette he believed it could be possible.

"In that case," Juliette said. The corner of her lip twitched. "I have good news for you, Your Grace." She cupped his cheek in her hand. "It's my pleasure to inform you that you will be a father sometime in early summer. I hope that meets with your approval."

He couldn't have asked for anything more. "You're perfect."

When he looked into her eyes every wish he'd ever dared to hope

for came true. She was his everything. He'd been a fool and gave up on her. At least she'd had the good sense to come to him in her moment of need. They took the long way around, but it worked out how it was supposed to. She was the brightest part, and the shooting star he'd made the biggest wish of his life on. When she crossed his path again it was the best thing that happened to him. He'd never give up her, on them, ever again.

They'd come so far in their lives. Life could do its worst and throw anything at them, and through it all he'd have faith in the strength of their love. Because Juliette was what held it all together. He finally understood the importance of the knots at their wedding. It was more than a string tied together in a fancy way. It was their love knotted together for eternity, and he wouldn't have it any other way.

Excerpt

A Kiss At Christmastide:
Connected by a Kiss
Book One
Christina McKnight
La Loma Elite Publishing

Prologue

Lady Pippa Godfrey, the only daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Midcrest, sat in the front row of Lord and Lady Sheridan's musicale recital, awaiting her turn at the pianoforte. It was the final evening of entertainment, thrown in Lady Natalie's honor on the eve of her introduction to society. The room was crowded, overly hot, and the competing voices were deafening as Pippa waited for the next debutante to be called to the dais to apply her talents to her chosen instrument—some played the harpsichord or another stringed instrument, while others favored singing.

Pippa's fingers ached, and her head swam at the thought of standing before the large crowd—mostly strangers and only a few she could greet by name—and playing the complex piece her music tutor had requested she perform. It was then that she looked to her lap and realized her hands were clenched tightly, clutching the fabric of her gown, wrinkling the delicate material and causing pain in her fingers.

Forcing her eyes shut, Pippa took a calming breath and pleaded with her hands to release their death grip on her gown. The delicate material would likely be creased beyond her lady's maid's ability to straighten it. It was as if her hands had a mind of their own—and Pippa feared they'd take over once more when she settled behind the pianoforte.

She mustn't make a spectacle of herself before so many people—it certainly would not do to start her first London Season being the topic of gossip in every salon and ballroom.

A raspy female voice cleared not far from Pippa, the sound quieting the room instantly as everyone held their breaths.

When Pippa opened her eyes, Lady Natalie stood on the raised dais with a coy smile as she surveyed the audience. They were all staring at her as if she were about to announce something far grander than the next young girl to massacre a piece written by a great composer—or worse yet, pierce every eardrum in the room as she sang a note far

too high. Her friend, Lady Natalie, was certainly at ease in her place as hostess and honoree of this grand three-day-long celebration.

In no way did she envy Natalie's effortless grace, for all Pippa wanted was for this evening—and her first Season—to be complete. For the moment, she'd settle for her time at the pianoforte to be over, for then she'd be allowed to depart the Sheridan townhouse for her own home in Mayfair. A few hours spent gowned in her night shift while reading a book by candlelight far into the morning hours, sounded much more pleasing to Pippa than standing before this crowd and announcing the piece that had been chosen for her to play while every set of eyes scrutinized her every move.

But Lady Natalie was her oldest and dearest friend.

Possibly her only friend.

And so, Pippa would smile, nod, and play the piano before giving a quick curtsy and allowing the next girl to take her moment in the spotlight.

It all sounded so very simple.

She'd been raised to do this exact thing, but no one could have expected the daughter of a duke to suffer from a shyness so severe she became short of breath and light-headed just pondering the notion of walking into a crowded ballroom. However, Pippa had pushed herself and fulfilled her daughterly obligations—entering a ballroom full of elegantly dressed women and stodgy men clustered in groups around the room. She'd even spotted several handsome men taking their turn around the dance floor. At first, her mother had allowed her to hide among the palms bordering the large room, but that hadn't lasted long. Men had approached her father and, eventually, placed their name on her dance card. And this evening had been no different—she garnered quite a bit of interest from eligible men, or so Lady Natalie had whispered to her several times. Her friend's words should have been a boon of sorts for them both. They'd dreamed for many years of entering society together and marrying titled, wealthy, handsome men—to the dismay and envious stares of all the other debutantes and their mothers.

But, while Natalie had whispered her shock over Pippa's popularity among the men, it sounded more of a hiss than a sigh of happiness. She'd put this behind her quickly the eve before.

This evening, as a new debutante and Lady Natalie's friend, Pippa was expected to play—and play well, as she and Natalie had shared an instructor since before their ninth summers.

Glancing at her mother who sat next to her, Pippa felt the urge to claim an illness and beg to be released from this obligation. But her mother's serene smile and encouraging nod made Pippa's erratic heartbeat slow. She prayed the sheen of perspiration on her forehead

would dry before Natalie called on her. It would be embarrassing to have the light from the chandelier above reflect off her damp forehead.

Belatedly, Pippa realized her mother was nodding at her because her name had been called and the room was silently awaiting her arrival on the raised platform featuring a piano, harpsichord, and flute stand. There was also a small table with a dozen bells of varying sizes perched—oh, how Pippa wished she'd been assigned the bells. Not a soul would know if she shook one out of turn.

Except for Mr. Giles, Pippa's instructor, who stood not far from the stage, his hands clasped before him with a proud smile on his handsome face—staring directly at her as if she were the only woman in the room. It was his way of making his pupils feel safe and encouraged. Pippa was certain he'd cast the same intense, yet sensitive, look on Lady Natalie before she'd sang earlier in the evening.

"Go on, dear," her mother prodded. "It is your turn."

A lump formed in her throat and Pippa was glad she hadn't any vocal talent. It was unlikely any sound could maneuver past her blocked airway.

After a quick smile for her mother, Pippa glanced once more to Mr. Giles where he stood just off the dais—his shoulders stiff with pride at his accomplishments as an instructor. His hair was evenly combed into place, so much at odds with its haphazard messiness during their tutoring sessions. Pippa thought she much preferred the disorderly locks he favored in the schoolroom back in Somerset, where she and Natalie had grown up.

She stood, hoping her smile was one of beauty and not terror as she stepped toward Natalie, who'd barely had a free moment in the last few days to speak with Pippa. If they had been given a few minutes together, she would have told her friend that she dreaded playing before a crowd...that she'd be happy to sit with the second and third-Season young women and refrain from the piano. But the conversation hadn't happened, and Natalie was unaware that her friend wanted nothing less than to perform.

And it would speak negatively of Mr. Giles' tutelage if one of his students—the daughter of a duke, no less—were unable to play before a crowd. Pippa desperately wanted her tutor to be looked upon favorably by all of London society.

"Next to grace the stage, is Lady Pippa Godfrey, daughter of the esteemed Duke and Duchess of Midcrest—and my dear friend." Natalie gestured in Pippa's direction as an odd expression crossed her face. It was not one Pippa was familiar with; almost as if a bank of storm clouds moved across her friend's face. However, the look

quickly passed, and Natalie's eyes sparkled once more. "Lady Pippa and I have been bosom friends since before we were allowed to touch a pianoforte. But since meeting, we've shared everything, including our music tutor, Mr. Giles, though I dare say Pippa is far closer to the man than my parents would ever allow. Her skills at the pianoforte certainly show the many hours of additional lessons she's endured."

Pippa's skin flared so hotly, she feared a candle had lit her gown—or her neatly pinned hair—ablaze.

Light female laughter and deep, manly chuckles filled the room, floating from the far back of the congregated crowd to the very front, where Pippa had sat back down with her parents.

She stole a glance to Mr. Giles who stood close to the edge of the dais, having only moments before congratulating another pupil on her success before the crowd. It was impossible to tell if his face flamed as hot as hers because he'd retreated a few steps into the shadows and was now backing out the terrace door.

A moment of confusion clouded her mind as the laughter dimmed and a light breeze assaulted her face—as if someone had opened a window to a gusty wind.

At her side, Pippa's mother fanned her face. Her wrist whipped to and fro, increasing as the room went silent.

Everything froze around her but her mother's thrashing fan.

The Duchess of Midcrest, her dear mother, who'd labored for over twenty years to rise above her merchant-class upbringing, would once again be embroiled in a scandal—all because of Pippa.

"Do you wish to depart?" her mother whispered.

"I did not..." Pippa stammered. "I would never..."

"I did not believe you had, my child." Her mother sought to soften the blow—something that society had done to the current Duchess of Midcrest a hundred times over. "However, that does not change the appearance of things, no matter what we say or do in this moment."

Pippa lifted her chin to keep her tears from streaming down her face.

"I do not understand why," Pippa said as she leaned in close to her mother to whisper. "Lady Natalie and I are such friends."

"Friendship and jealousy often hold hands so tightly that one cannot distinguish between the pair."

Pippa could not imagine why Lady Natalie would say such a thing—before the many people gathered at her parents' townhouse, amidst their first Season—and knowing her family sought a favorable match for her.

They'd shared a magical couple of days before the formal dinner introducing Natalie and then her ball the evening before. Pippa had danced every dance, her card filling quickly after entering the

ballroom at the Sheridan townhouse. Lady Natalie had also danced almost every set and was escorted to dinner by the Marquis of Durshire, a wealthy, respected man whose handsomeness was legendary. Pippa and her family had stayed the night as the ball had lasted into the early morning hours. The girls had fallen into a deep slumber of exhaustion, their feet sore and their minds running wild at the grandness of their evening, only to sleep late into the day. When Pippa had awoken, Natalie was already surrounded by maids in preparation for this evening's entertainments. They hadn't time to speak on the matter of the recital.

But now, only a few short hours later, Pippa's dear friend had spoken aloud a comment that would ruin Pippa's chances of securing any type of promising match—and tarnish her family's name, once again.

Pippa wanted to ask why—what had she done to deserve such a comment before all these people?

She and Natalie had discussed their handsome music tutor in confidence, each laboring over the set of his strong jaw, the way his hair fell a bit too long in a very rakish way, and the muscles that lay under his loose linen shirt—certainly not obtained by musical endeavors.

Mr. Giles had removed himself entirely from the room by the time Pippa stared deeper into the shadows bordering the stage—leaving all eyes on Pippa with her back to the crowd. Lady Natalie smiled at her, awaiting her acceptance on the dais.

It was then that Pippa noticed Natalie's upturned smirk was not a smile at all—at least, not a smile one would bestow on a lifelong friend. And that smirk paired with the glare in her dear friend's eyes... Something drastic had changed since they'd journeyed to London a few days before to prepare for their Season.

Lady Natalie was issuing Pippa a challenge...much like a rival.

Pasting a serene smile on her face, Pippa squared her shoulders and stood to take her place behind the pianoforte.

She refused to allow her defeat to show—but certainly, Pippa had been bested, and by her bosom friend, no less. She only wished she'd known there was a battle at hand.

Chapter 1

Somerset, England

December 1813

Lady Pippa stared into the open flames of the hearth—where a constant drizzle snaked down the chimney flue to pool behind the roaring fire—as the storm continued to rage outside. Her day—and night—had consisted of reading yet another book of her favorite holiday stories and watching the pooling water sizzle and dissipate as it approached the hot flames consuming the large logs. It had been her greatest tradition each year after arriving at her family’s country manor, Helton House; hours turning into days as she re-read all her favorite holiday books.

The many hours were only interrupted by a footman entering to place another log on the fire. But it had been a long while since she’d bid the servant retire for the evening.

This night, Pippa had found it difficult—nearly impossible, actually—to concentrate on anything with the storm roaring outside. Especially since she knew she was essentially alone in the large house with all the servants having gone home before the storm, and the few that were in residence safely abed. Where Pippa should be herself. She pulled the blanket tighter around her legs as a draft moved through the room and chilled her exposed ankles. Glancing behind her, she expected to see Briars, her family butler, in the doorway, but the door was securely closed, and the aging servant was long asleep for the night.

A sharp light lit the room through the windows, the draperies still pinned back from where they’d been during the daylight hours. An

onslaught of heavy rain pelted the thin windowpanes. Pippa regretted her request that the windows stay uncovered in case she spotted lights moving through the dark storm, signaling her parents' arrival.

But her wish of seeing anything through the angry storm declined as the torrential downpour continued hour after hour, making the local roads impassable by carriage. She only hoped the Duke and Duchess of Midcrest were wise enough to seek refuge from the drenching rains, lightning, and lashing wind on their way home from Bath.

Setting her book aside, Pippa removed her blanket and stood. Her toes touched the frigid floor as she moved quickly across the room to pull the drapes closed—locking out the sight of the lightning. With any luck, it would diminish the sound of the howling winds outside, as well.

She paused before the window, pulling the material back one last time, and stared out to the countryside surrounding her home. Though it was too dark to see anything, she'd spent the last eighteen years memorizing the landscape around Helton House: the rolling hills, the wooded area to the left of her property which everyone took as the border between her family and that of the Duke of Sheridan, Lady Natalie's father. In recent months, the trees had made a barrier that Pippa hadn't dared cross.

Their property even boasted a small pond that froze over during the colder months.

Unfortunately, this Yuletide celebration would not find her home surrounded by snow-covered hills or frost-kissed trees—or a pond frozen enough to walk upon. At this point, they'd be blessed to have dry, unmolded grain and hay to feed their livestock come spring. Pippa could only imagine the coming weeks of repairs the village would need due to leaking roofs and flooded dwellings.

Pippa sighed at the sight outside her manor—one that in no way resembled any Christmastide of the past. At this rate, she'd be lucky if her home didn't float away on a river created by the rain that had assaulted the area for almost a full day now—the temperature staying far above that of freezing.

Nothing about this year would be like the ones before, though the deplorable weather was not fully to blame. Pippa had sensed that things were not as they should be from the moment she'd received word that the Sheridans were hosting yet another three-day celebration to honor Natalie. This time, it was rumored that they'd announce her betrothal—to the son of a marquess, no less.

She should be happy for her dear friend—or, at least the girl she'd grown up with and thought of as a sister before Natalie had changed into a woman whom Pippa did not recognize. Her feelings toward the

girl were petty, though grounded in truth. But wishing ill will on another was something Pippa found extreme discontent with.

In a huff, Pippa pulled the drapes shut, blocking out the rain and wind for good.

"I refuse to feel sorry for myself," she muttered, not for the first time since receiving the invitation to join Lady Natalie's holiday house party.

It was actually a blessing that her parents' carriage had been held up by the storm. They would likely insist on traveling the short mile to Lady Natalie's home to join in the revelry—to confirm that no animosity remained between the neighboring dukedoms.

No matter how much bitterness Pippa had locked within. Lady Natalie was to wed, and Pippa was alone—cast from society after the embarrassment of her first Season.

Even with all this, her mother staunchly believed that one could not find happiness and fulfillment in life if he or she cast negative thoughts and tidings toward another. A new reason to be thankful they were not here to witness her sulking about as if her prized gloves were missing or stained.

Picking up her book, Pippa fell back into the fluffy armchair she favored so. She tucked her feet under her and returned her blanket to ward off the growing cold in the room as the fire's intensity decreased. From her father's private study down the hall, eleven gongs could be heard, signaling the lateness of the night. For London, most would only be starting their evening by enjoying a meal with friends and acquaintances. But while in the country, Pippa delighted in being abed at sundown and rising when the sun made its next appearance on the horizon.

Early morning walks around the estate—from the house, out around the pond, and back through the stables to check on the animals—was a pastime she thoroughly found great pleasure in. She'd never thought she'd miss the freedom of her morning strolls after her introduction to society, but walking—other than in one of the many crowded parks in London proper—was frowned upon, especially without a proper chaperone. One could not think or ponder anything while being following by a maid.

The current storm had robbed Pippa of her morning out. As the day passed, she felt similar to the canaries women kept, a caged animal, longing to escape and roam.

Again, the storm was not fully to blame for her sense of overwhelming confinement.

It went far deeper than being trapped within her home during a nasty tempest.

The windowpane rattled as particularly heavy rain assaulted it

once more followed by a thunderous racket. Lightning flared even through the drawn drapes. A door slamming somewhere deep within her home had her jumping with nervousness. The storm's intensity was only increasing as the night grew later.

She took a deep, calming breath before opening her book once more. Pippa started where she'd left off when she'd been distracted by the rain traveling into the chimney.

Had that been five minutes ago or five hours? Pippa had lost track of so many things of late.

Nothing contributed to her Christmastide cheer more than holiday tales of merriment—and she desperately hoped to repair her sullen mood. While in London, Pippa had discovered a small bookseller off Bond Street that was hidden from view down a narrow alley. Her mother had been more than agreeable to allow Pippa time to scour the shop while the duchess was fitted for new gowns. During one of her many visits, Pippa had found a thick tome full of ancient fables surrounding the winter months—not only tales from various Christian beliefs, but also pagan traditions, and even a few stories full of scary, hand-drawn images of ghosts and ghouls. Pippa had quickly flipped past those stories when she'd sat down to read shortly after her noonday meal, for they would only frighten her more with the storm raging so near.

Pippa was determined to banish her dour mood before her parents arrived—she may be a bit downcast, but she'd never allow that to ruin her mother's beloved holiday.

Turning the page, Pippa read yet another tale of the miracles of Christmastide, and love found during this magical time of year.

Her family property was rife with holly, and she'd had several groomsmen collect large sprigs for her just the previous day in preparation for decorating the house when her mother arrived home.

Pippa was vaguely familiar with the story of her parents' past. They'd found one another at a Christmastide celebration—and had fallen in love under a holly wreath set before a roaring fire.

Obviously, Lady Natalie had done her part to secure a match... while Pippa had buckled under the pressures of society and cut her first Season short in favor of an extended stay at her childhood home. If only Pippa would have read this book the previous year, maybe she could have secured a kiss before now—as the only men in residence at Helton House were her butler, several footmen, and the stable hands.

She pondered the notion of journeying to Lady Natalie's holiday party, hoping to land an eligible man worthy of her first kiss. But she pushed the thought aside when a loud bark of thunder ripped through the room.

The downpour was only swelling, along with the wind. The roads

were flooded and impassable, even on horseback. And the hour was late.

Pippa was stuck.

At any other time, she would have been at peace with her fate, but not tonight. If an opening in the storm presented itself, she'd likely take the opportunity to flee—to London...possibly even Lady Natalie's celebration. Anywhere other than being here alone.

She should retire to her chambers, get some much-needed rest, and awake in a far more agreeable mood. Most things appeared brighter by morning light, or so her mother told her.

Shaking her head, Pippa cast a sidelong glance at the covered window before setting her book aside. Staying awake would not make the night pass any quicker, or the storm dissipate any sooner. She needed a good night's rest if her mother were to arrive in the morn, for holiday preparations would swiftly follow if she did.

Another loud clap of thunder shook the room—but it did not cease as the others had; instead, it continued steadily.

Surely the gates of hell were opening and releasing the ghouls and ghosts from their fiery pits. Pippa shouldn't have opened the book of Christmastide stories. She regretted the brief moment she'd spied the hand-drawn illustrations of creatures not of this realm.

It was then that a voice yelled above the storm, reaching her in the library.

It was not thunder at all, but someone pounding on her door.

She jumped to her feet and rushed toward the foyer to allow them entrance, grabbing her book and tucking it under her arm. Her parents, as radical as they were, must have thrown caution to the wind and traveled through the storm to see her. They were foolish, and their risk great; however, Pippa was overjoyed that they'd arrived.

Many things pushed to the forefront of her mind as she ran to open the door. She needed to call Cook to prepare them a meal, their bed should be prepped for them with hot coals to warm their linens, and the stable master need be awoken to tend to their horses.

Pippa was glad for the distraction from her previous melancholy mood.

Turning the lock, Pippa threw the door wide, a smile lighting her face for the first time that day—only to be faced with a stranger. On her doorstep was a man completely unknown to her, his hair matted and his clothing drenched and sticking to his thin frame.

"Is your master home?" he asked, removing his saturated hat from his balding head.

"I am Lady Pippa." She stared at the man intensely, waiting for him to state his business on Midcrest land and be gone.

"My lady," the man started over with his greeting, bowing. "I am

repentant to awaken you, but my lord seeks shelter, and we have not passed an inn for many hours. The storm made it impossible for our carriage to continue on the main road.”

Pippa remained silent as the man spoke, his body shuddering with cold as his saturated livery garb clung to him. She clutched the door with one hand to avoid it opening further in invitation, while her other arm pushed solidly against her side, keeping her book from falling to the floor.

“I fear our carriage is knee-deep in mud with the storm continuing to increase, and it has thrown a spoke.” He looked at her expectantly, as if offering shelter was the only option for her. “My lord, the Earl of Maddox, requests refuge for the night if you will be so kind as to accept him.”

“I...well...” Pippa’s manners abandoned her at the same time she realized she was alone on the first floor of the house. “There is an inn only—”

A great wind hit Pippa, forcing her back, the door ripped from her hand. It slammed against the wall behind it. The sound echoed through the empty house as it collided with the tall walls of the foyer and rattled the chandelier as her loose tresses blocked her view. A moment of sheer panic seized her when her sight was taken from her.

Pippa pushed her hair away to continue with instructing the servant to the nearest inn. “Your lord will be far more comfortable...”

The wind whipped the last of her hair from her face to reveal not the servant from before, but a tall—very tall—broad-shouldered—very broad-shouldered—man. And that was all Pippa saw of him as her glance became locked on his chest. He was drenched, with his shirt plastered to his considerable width. It hadn’t been the wind that had knocked the door from her hands and allowed the storm access to her home, but rather the man before her.

And he was fuming mad—his nostrils flared as water dripped from his hair and he stared at her pointedly—not bothering to mask his aggressive stance.

“Were you truly going to turn away a man in need of shelter?” his voice boomed.

Pippa gasped, taking yet another step back. She glanced quickly over her shoulder, hoping the noise had awoken one of her servants, abed on the third floor of the house. But none came running to aid her.

“I knew I was venturing into the depths of hell when I agreed to come all this way from London, but are manners not taught in the wilds of Somerset?” The man ran his hands down the front of his shirt, pushing the water from his body to pool on the floor beneath him. “My servants will need space in your stables. I thank you for”—he

eyed her up and down before continuing—"your hospitality, my lady."

He bowed before Pippa with his last words, and his breath caressed her body, making her acutely aware of two things: he smelled heavily of spirits, and she was attired in a sheer nightshift that did not leave much to the imagination.

Excerpt

Surrendering to My Spy
(Linked Across Time 4)

Dawn Brower

Prologue

June 1815

Lady Rosanna Kendall strolled down the hall of her brother's townhouse. Her brother, Edward, was the current Duke of Weston. He'd inherited the title a few years past when their father passed on. An echo of voices came through the walls. Rosanna stopped short when she recognized who was speaking with Edward in his study. Lord Seabrook was in there. "Dom," she whispered to herself. Dominic Rossington, the Marquess of Seabrook. She'd loved him from afar most of her life, and he was now a breath away. If she dared to go into the study and interrupt them she'd be able to see him, and if she was lucky enough maybe a touch as well.

Did she dare?

Rosanna inched closer to the room. The door was slightly ajar. She peeked inside and saw movement. A blur of dark fabric and a slight hint of blond hair—nothing more. She wanted to have the full view of Dom's perfection. He had to be the most handsome man in creation. He had glorious golden hair, eyes the color of a stormy gray sky, and the face of an angel. That is if an angel could master the wicked glances the marquess threw out with regularity.

Rosanna was no fool. She knew he was a rogue of the highest accord. He made no secret he wasn't seeking a wife and found what he desired in the arms of many other women. Her heart hurt knowing he'd never love her the same way she did him. It turned out unrequited love would be her lot in life. She shook her melancholy away and focused on their discussion. It wouldn't do to fall into that particular line of thought. Dom would never be hers, and it was time to let the fantasy go. She'd had suitors a plenty, but not one of them measured up to her dream.

"I wish you wouldn't involve yourself in this," Dom said.

“James...”

“I don’t bloody care what my brother would say,” Edward spat out. “I’m the Duke of Weston and I can do whatever I want.”

What were they arguing about? What did it have to do with James? Rosanna hadn’t seen her other brother, Edward’s twin, in a couple of years. He’d joined a Calvary regiment and went off to fight in the war against Napoleon. She was terrified one day they’d receive news of him that wouldn’t be good. It was hard to sit with the knowledge he could be gravely injured or—she gulped—die fighting. Dom was James’s best friend. If not for their friendship she’d not have had the opportunity to come to know Dom so well. She saw a side of him none of his chosen lovers did. He was funny, protective, and loyal to those he cared for. That was the man she’d fallen in love with. Yes, Rosanna was vain enough to realize it was his face she’d noticed first, but once she’d seen past his blinding beauty and into his soul everything changed.

A loud crash brought her back to reality. It echoed through the room as something thudded against the wall. Rosanna jerked back and clenched her arms against herself.

“You’re a fool,” Dom shouted. “What you’ve done...”

“I’ve done nothing you haven’t.”

“There is a difference and you better well realize it before you make a mistake you can’t return from.” Dom’s voice was edged with a hardness Rosanna had never heard before. What had Edward done? “Tell me what your reckless plan uncovered.”

“Not here,” Edward said. “You never know who’s listening.”

What was Edward hiding? What made him so nervous? Should she be worried? Dom appeared to be angry at her brother, and Dom never even remotely raised his voice. He was always carefree and congenial. If Edward didn’t want to discuss it at their home—it must be serious. She should leave before they exited the study. They’d both turn their ire on discovering her hovering nearby.

“Something you should have considered before you followed a trail that could lead to your death.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Dom. That’s unlikely to happen.”

Was Dom right? Had Edward done something that could get him killed? She’d been worried for so long about James’s safety and perhaps she’d been praying for the wrong brother. Rosanna backed away from the study and headed to the library. It was close enough to Edward’s study she’d be able to hear when they left.

She stopped short when she realized the library wasn’t empty as she’d assumed. Lady Callista Lyon, the Countess of Marin sat on a nearby settee reading a book. She glanced up as Rosanna entered. Her dark green eyes brightened when she met Rosanna’s gaze. Callista was

betrothed to her brother, Edward. They were set to be married in a sennight. The wedding was to take place at Weston Manor. The family, along with Callista's, was scheduled to travel there by midweek.

"I'm sorry to disrupt you," Rosanna said. "I thought the library was unoccupied."

"I welcome the intrusion," Lady Callista said and set her book down. "I sent my maid to fetch my cloak. I don't know what is taking your brother so long, but it's past time I went home."

It was rather unusual for her brother's intended to be lounging in their library. What had the lady been thinking? She was rather independent, and a widow, but there was still propriety standards that should be adhered to. She didn't know Lady Callista well. The little she knowledge she had consisted of, a marriage to the elderly Earl of Marin when she was eight and ten. The earl had died a mere six months after the marriage. She'd been out of mourning no more than a month before she caught Edward's eye. It was no surprise why. Lady Callista was a beauty. She had beautiful mahogany hair and the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. Her heart shaped face was exquisite. Rosanna wished she could be as graceful and poised as her. If she were more—approachable. Rosanna didn't feel as if she could truly become close to her. She was friendly enough, but there was something elusive about her as well.

"I have your cloak, milady. Do you wish to depart now?"

"You're leaving?" Edward entered the room. "I didn't realize how late it was. I'm sorry I left you alone."

"It is all right. I entertained myself. We can discuss the wedding plans on the way to your estate in a couple of days." Callista nodded at her maid. The young woman draped it over her with care. "I'll take your leave until then."

Edward nodded. He didn't even spare Rosanna a glance. "I'll see you out."

It was brief and over before she'd even realized what happened. Edward's relationship with Lady Callista was so...odd. She didn't know what it was that bothered her. Perhaps she'd never know. In her experience it was hard to truly know what went on between two people. Only those inside it were truly aware of all the nuances. Maybe one day she'd share that wonder with another.

"What are you doing all alone in here?"

Rosanna turned and met Dom's gaze. She repressed a sigh at the sight of him. This had been what she'd wanted. Some time to stare at his male beauty and to hear his voice in that low tone that sent shivers down her body. She'd never tire of being around him.

"Edward left to escort Lady Callista to the door. I don't rate a

glance from my brother these days." She tilted her head and studied him. "What are you doing here?" Perhaps that was insolent, but she couldn't help herself. She'd never stood on formality where Dom was concerned. Why hadn't he left before her brother came into the library? Were they leaving to go somewhere more private to discuss Edward's discovery?

"I have business with your brother, brat." He strolled into the room. "But I can keep you company until he returns."

"It's not necessary." As much as she loved him, and adored being in his company, Rosanna was afraid she'd confess it all in a blubbery mess of need. He turned her insides to mush, and her thoughts weren't far behind. "I am capable of spending time by myself."

His lids drooped low as he stared down at her. "A beautiful lady shouldn't ever be left to her own devices. What fun would that be?"

Was he? No, he couldn't be. Dom appeared to be flirting with her. What game was he playing? She didn't dare hope he wanted to court her properly. He'd never once indicated an interest in her. He wouldn't start now. There had to be another reason for him speak to her in an overly familiar manner.

"I'm not one of your light skirts," she said harshly. "Don't speak to me as if I were."

Dom stepped back as if she'd slapped him. Color drained from his face. "I'd never..."

"I'd hope not." Rosanna lifted her chin arrogantly. "I plan on marriage, and the entire ton knows how you feel about taking a wife."

"That they do," he said sardonically. He gave her the once over with slow excruciating precision. "I assure you, not only do I never intend to marry, but you're the last lady I'd ever consider."

He spun on his heels and left her alone. His words shattered her heart into thousands of tiny pain filled shards. What had she done? She'd pushed him away forever. Why had she spoken to him with such harshness? He hadn't done anything untoward. Dom—was well—Dom, there wasn't a mean bone in his body. Rosanna would never recover from her blunder.



"Lady Rosanna," Dominic Rossington, the Marquess of Seabrook said, with a bow. The discord between them remained palpable whenever they were near each other. She'd been so warm

and welcoming in the past, but that changed with one flicker of thoughtless words flung in her direction. He should regret them, and in a way he did. It didn't change the circumstances. Rosanna needed to understand he would never marry. He wasn't a fool, and was very much aware of her growing attachment. In a different world he'd have been pleased and delighted at the prospect of having her as a wife. But his life didn't leave room for one. "I apologize for intruding, but I have news I must share with you."

Rosanna was sitting in the library they'd last seen each other in. Had it been two days since he'd laid eyes on her? She was as beautiful as he remembered, and equally as untouchable. Her dark tresses were coiled on top of her head in an elaborate chignon, and her violet eyes observed him with cool efficiency.

"I won't keep you. Tell me what you must as I'm sure my company disgusts you." Her voice was hoarse with an unidentifiable emotion. "I believe I'm the last person you wish to have any sort of discourse with."

This had to be about his last remark about her being the last lady he'd ever marry. No young lady liked to hear those words thrown at them. Dom had been the worst kind of swine to say them aloud to her. He meant them though, but not for the reasons she assumed. Lady Rosanna Kendall was too good for him. He would taint her by spending any amount of time in her company. She deserved a husband who would cherish and adore her. Someone who didn't have the reputation he'd carefully cultivated over the past few years.

"I promise you, I don't disdain you in the slightest." His forehead creased. "You're to go to Weston Manor in the morning, and I had to tell you..."

How could he say it? She'd be devastated once she learned of the news. The whole family would be. What about James? How was he to tell his best friend he was responsible for what happened to Edward. If he'd been able to stop him in his foolhardy inquiries...

"What is it?" Rosanna leaned forward and studied him. "You're not usually at a loss for word."

Dom didn't want to hurt her, had never wanted to do her any kind of harm. The words that were currently lodged in his throat would surely cause her no small amount of pain. But he had to tell her before someone else did. She should hear the news from someone who cared about her and her family.

"There was an accident..."

Rosanna leapt up and strode toward him. "Is it James?"

Of course she'd jump to that conclusion. Why wouldn't it be James? He was at war and on the front lines. He shook his head. "No, it isn't James."

“Who is it?” she demanded. “You’re scaring me.”

Dom closed his eyes and prayed for strength. Rosanna was the one woman he’d always admired and vowed to take care of. No other had ever mattered as much to him. He’d lay down his life to protect her, and here he was about to destroy a part of her. It had to be done.

“Edward’s carriage hit something in the road. A wheel broke and it tipped over the side of a bridge. He—didn’t make it to Weston Manor.” He stared into her violet eyes and said morosely, “It’s with greatest sympathy I must tell you that your brother, Edward, The fourth Duke of Weston, has died.”

Rosanna’s screams filled his ears. Tears streamed down her face as she beat her small fists against his chest. He took every bit of her ire as he believed was his due. Dom hadn’t protected Edward from his reckless behavior, and now the people he cared about most would pay that price. After a short while he helped her back onto the settee and called for a maid to see to her care. He turned, exited the room, and left her alone—not once glancing back.

Rosanna wasn’t his, and never would be...

About Dawn Brower

Dawn Brower holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Master of Arts in Education, and a Master of Arts in Liberal Arts with concentrations in Literature, History, and Sociology. She works as a substitute teacher and enjoys the flexibility it gives her to concentrate on her other endeavors.

Growing up she was the only girl out of six children. She is a single mother of two teenage boys; there is never a dull moment in her life. Reading books is her favorite hobby. While she loves all genres she focuses most of her writing on historical and contemporary romance.

There are always stories inside her head; she just never thought she could make them come to life. That creativity has finally found an outlet.

For more information visit her website at: <http://www.authordawnbrower.com/>

Books by Dawn Brower

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Christmas Seduction

Samantha Holt

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Chapter 1

Penicuik, Scotland 1879

The last time Alexander, Duke of Wyndbourne, had seen his wife, she had been embracing another man. Even as the groom drew down the steps of his closed carriage and Alex stepped out to survey the wintery scene, heat pulsed through his veins, bringing with it fresh annoyance.

Balmead looked to be in good order. He paused, hands on his hips to view the castle. With its round turrets and tall keep, it was every inch the grand Scottish home. The light dusting of snow that had been falling throughout his journey truly completed the picture. He was just grateful it was only a light snowfall, or else he might have been forced to turn back.

Grateful? Was he? He finally dropped his gaze to the woman waiting on the steps for him. His heart did an odd jig in his chest. Part of him longed to have had an excuse to return to London for Christmas. Then he would not have to face the lady who had humiliated and hurt him.

Not that he wanted to admit as much, but the image of her tucked against a virile-looking man still created the deepest ache in his gut. He'd never expected much from their marriage—Emma was a quiet, cold sort, but he had hoped for some kind of companionship at least. And Lord knows, he'd looked forward to a constant bed partner.

Drawing in a breath of cool, crisp air, he drew off his hat and made his way to the steps. With her red hair and pale skin, she could almost pass for a bonny Scottish lass, but Emma was every inch the cold, reserved Englishwoman. Barely a hint of emotion sat in those blue eyes as he took her hand and dropped a kiss to her bare fingers.

Her beauty annoyed him. His reaction to her delicate hand aggravated him. Stirrings of sensations both unwelcome and welcome

pervaded his body. Welcome, for he would need to bed her as soon as he could, and unwelcome because he still hated the woman.

Needs must, he reminded himself. Nearly a year of marriage without a child was not acceptable, and he had to do his duty. Alex could hardly sire an heir if he didn't see his wife, after all. He would devote all his Christmas to getting her with child, then flee once more. He intended to be a good father and spend time with the child once it was born. Of course, he would need another child too. But if he could limit his time with his wife, he certainly would.

"Your Grace, how was your journey?"

Alex scowled at her as he rose. He'd forgotten the effect her voice had on him. It was like her. Steady, controlled...but with a soft hint that never failed to reach down inside him and pull at his gut.

"Good, thank you. I feared I might get caught in the snow, but Mother Nature has decided to be merciful."

"Indeed." Her lips pulled into a thin smile.

Quite a feat really, as they were ridiculously full and beautiful lips. Everything about his wife was beautiful. Her glossy red hair, her heart-shaped face, deep blue eyes...and from their limited time together in bed, he knew her figure was not just the work of corsets and bustles. She had curves that made a man want to drop to his knees and beg to kiss every inch of them.

What a shame her character was left wanting.

"I fear the snow shall not hold off long," she said before turning on her heel. "Come inside, it is freezing."

Alex watched her for a moment. Nothing about her had changed, whereas he felt immeasurably different. World-weary almost. She walked with a steady grace, her head held high. The dark green gown she wore curved over her waist while the bustle at the back enhanced the slender shape of it. His mouth grew dry when he remembered putting his hands to that waist on their first night together. His mouth had been just as dry then. What a bumbling fool he had been.

Walking swiftly to catch up, he handed his hat and coat to the butler, Hampton, and kept pace with her as she moved into the drawing room. With antlers and shields on the wall, the rustic appearance of his Scottish home was far removed from the drawing rooms of London or France. Bare stone lined these walls and though the furnishings were fine, he was surprised Emma had left it so untouched. He had given her free reign after all and the estate made a good living. All women were keen to put their personal touch on places, were they not?

She signalled to the footman to bring over the tea and motioned for him to sit.

As though he was a guest. In his own blasted home.

Alex gritted his teeth and sat on the chair. He fingered the velvet covering on the arm briefly and noted the wear. Perhaps things were not as well cared for as he thought. He glanced around and realised she only had a few candles and three oil lamps burning. With the grim weather, the room was gloomy and in need of more illumination than three lamps. Why in the devil was she living like a pauper? Had the estate been losing money this year? He was sure she would have no problems living comfortably on what it earned but perhaps he needed to look at the books.

Emma sat opposite him and clasped her hands in her lap while the footman brought over the tea and poured it for both of them. Alex took the cup and held it gratefully. Coldness had seeped into his bones during the journey and his fingers still felt stiff. Thank goodness for the large fire crackling in the hearth.

She cleared her throat, drawing his attention to her but as soon as he glanced her way, she dropped her gaze to her lap. Her cup of tea was left untouched. He found himself tapping his foot. What to say to her? What did one say to a woman one barely knew yet had bedded—even if only a few times? What did one say to one's estranged wife?

"Are you ready for Christmas?" he asked, feeling as though his voice was the loudest sound on Earth, and he had just taken a hammer and shattered the silence with it.

Those beautiful blue eyes widened and locked with his. "Oh, yes, I have the meals planned out. It will only be a small party, however. Your mother and a few cousins. Many preferred to stay south for the winter."

He nodded. He didn't blame them. As beautiful as the estate was, it was a darn sight warmer in London. Alex let his lips quirk. His icy wife certainly fit in well here.

"You have not decorated yet." It had only just struck him, but there was distinct lack of greenery or even a Christmas tree.

Her lips tightened and her gaze darted from side to side. "There are decorations in the dining room. It seemed...extravagant to decorate everywhere when it would be so small a party."

Letting a brow rise, he studied her. A tiny hint of perspiration sat on her top lip. Any other time, the sight might have tugged at his insides—the idea of sweeping his tongue over her lips and tasting them certainly held appeal—but the way she could not meet his gaze or how her throat worked made him tighten his grip on his cup.

"Extravagant? Am I not a duke? Why should a few baubles and bits of tree be extravagant?"

She winced at his tone and he regretted it instantly. The fact he had summoned some kind of emotion from his wife, even if it was a little bit of fear, surprised him however. He saw her knuckles whiten

in her lap and the cold mien to her expression snapped back.

"Forgive me, I didn't know you were coming until a few weeks ago, it was not really long enough—"

He waved a hand, dismissing her words. He regretted that movement too. He never meant to be an arse around her and yet he found himself behaving like an absolute blackguard in her company, when all he wanted to do was get on with her comfortably. Oh yes, and seduce her.

"Few candles lit, no decorations...we are not paupers, Emma. What's going on?"

"N-nothing is going on." That throat worked again and he had the deepest desire to run his tongue across it.

"I think I shall have to look over the books," he murmured, more to himself than anything.

Emma's shoulders straightened. "I am not mismanaging the estate if that is what you believe. I've done my very best, Alexander. Balmead is a large estate and I have little experience managing such a place, but I have tried my hardest." She paused and her lips parted to take in a breath.

"I did not—"

She stood abruptly. "It's all very well for you, running off and doing whatever you wish, but I've been stuck here, trying to do my best. I did not think you the sort to be bothered by decorations or frivolities..."

Her chest rose and fell and he eyed it, feeling the inevitable heat of desire curling into his gut. He stood too and tried to get over his astonishment at her flare of anger. Colour sat in her cheeks and her eyes were animated. He'd never seen her like this, not even on those few occasions he'd bedded her. Even then, she had remained cold and unfeeling.

"I did not mean to imply..." He paused. Didn't he? What had he been saying? That she had not been managing the estate properly? He hardly knew, seeing as he had been here all of five minutes.

Emma drew her chin up and eyed him coolly. "I must speak with Hannah and ensure all is ready for dinner tonight. Please excuse me. I'm glad you are home, Your Grace. Good day."

She swept past him, the faintest floral hint washing over him as she went. He put out a hand to stop her. He only needed to brush her arm to have her pausing and peering at him through narrowed eyes. He was mightily glad, for he did not wish to manhandle her. Besides, the smallest touch seemed to send tingles through his arm. Alex recalled the very same sensation the first time he had danced with her.

That seemed so long ago now.

Words of apology sat on his tongue, but he had never been good at communicating—particularly not with his cool, quiet wife. He'd always considered himself a man of action. Hence why he had vanished to France upon discovering her with her lover. Did the man still attend to her in bed? Was he somewhere about the castle at this very moment?

Instead of saying something soft or apologetic, his mind attached itself to the fleeting realisation he had not seen his valet. "Where is Stanley?"

That graceful, pale throat worked again. "Mr Stanley?"

"The very same."

"He is no longer here."

He scowled. "He has gone somewhere for Christmas?"

"No, Your Grace. He took a job elsewhere."

"But why?"

Two spots of colour appeared on her cheek. "Forgive me, I thought you would be bringing your valet with you. Had I realised..."

"I gave him Christmas off. He has a sister in London."

The fearful cast to her gaze dissipated slightly, but only a little. Not enough to appease him. Damnation, he didn't want her fearful around him, Or did he? Did she not deserve every moment of his scorn for humiliating him? For making a cuckold of him? Nevertheless, the pang of guilt at frightening her—at always frightening her, it seemed—struck deep and sharp.

"Mr Jacoby can attend you," she suggested, and he recalled that was the second footman. "He is quite efficient, I can assure you."

Though tempted to query the departure of his valet, Alex let it slide. They had already had enough of a disagreement as it was and he'd only been in residence for all of five minutes. Was he not meant to be intent on drawing his wife into bed? Arguing with her would not help his cause. Stanley had been at Balmead for as long as he could remember but seeing as he rarely spent time in Scotland, even before abandoning his wife, he had not used his services very often.

"Very well," he said stiffly.

Emma dipped her head in acknowledgement and left the room, leaving behind the floral scent to remind him of her. For all his annoyance with her, he still felt the buzz of attraction stirring through his veins. It had been what persuaded him to propose to her. There had been no friendship between them, no real basis for a marriage, but her wealth combined with the deep ache in his gut had been enough to persuade him they could have a good marriage. His family was keen on the match and thus, after no more than three social engagements, he had asked for her hand.

Alex pushed his fingers through his hair. He had to wonder if that

had not been the biggest mistake of his life.

Chapter 2

Emma sat in the drawing room and gazed into the fire, acutely aware Alexander was in the library. She ought to be relieved that dinner was over and the awful stilted atmosphere could be put behind her, but she found herself straightening at every creak of floorboards, every groan of the old castle, wondering if it might be her husband. Many times, in her most lonely moments, she had wished it would be him—that he had returned and would take her as his wife. Properly.

But the reality was, her husband hated her, and she would never really be glad to see him. Loneliness was preferable surely? Nothing made her feel more useless and pathetic than when he looked at her with anger and frustration in his gaze. Emma rubbed her chest. She was a failure as a wife. In bed and out of it. Why else would he have run off? The few times they had made love had been terrible. She, in her shyness and innocence, knew little of what to do and had no way of even expressing so. What sort of wife could not even make simple conversation with her husband?

He hated her.

And now he was questioning her management of the castle. She was trying her best, but the years had been lean and her expenses...well, they were far higher than they ought to be thanks to Geoffrey. But what else was she to do? Abandon her half-brother to the world? No one else would help him nor acknowledge him. His very existence was an embarrassment to the family.

Another creak made her breath catch. She should retreat to bed now, then she could be sure of not running into Alexander. Lord, if only he was not so attractive. Maybe she would not be so shy around him.

But she knew that was unlikely. Everyone made her shy. Emma had little idea why, but ever since she was a child, she had held her tongue for fear of what people might think of her. She recalled her mother declaring her sense of humour gauche and indelicate once. She

wasn't sure she had a sense of humour anymore. She was nothing. Nobody. An attractive face with no substance, and that's all her family had ever expected of her. Be pretty enough to attract the right man. She had done as much but where had that got her?

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she rose and tried to ignore the building ache in her chest. For all her foolishness, she had been glad he was returning. Being secluded at Balmead, where they seldom received visitors, had been the loneliest year of her life. What a fool she had been to think her husband returning would erase any of that. Instead, she felt lonelier than ever.

Emma tip-toed out of the drawing room and peered into the gloom of the hall. She had not taken a candle from the drawing room but the light in the top windows usually cast enough of a glow. Not tonight, however. Tonight the clouds must have converged to conceal every drop of moonlight or twinkling starlight.

Just as she put a foot to the bottom stair and gripped the banister, preparing to make her way cautiously up to her bedroom, a cough made her jump. She squeaked and spun, nearly spilling to the floor in her haste as her foot caught on the hem of her gown. A strong, male arm looped around her waist and righted her.

Emma found herself flattened against a similarly strong male body. Every puff of air inside her seemed to vanish and heat flowed over her. She lifted her gaze to see Alexander's face, highlighted by the candle he was holding at a distance from her as he kept her clamped to him with one arm. If there had been any remaining breath in her body, it would have stuck in her throat but as it was there was none, so she was forced to make an odd stuttering sound.

His deep brown eyes were hooded and soulful. The firm lips so often tightened in annoyance were relaxed. The flickering light highlighted the dip in his chin she longed to press a finger to and the dimple in one cheek. She always thought it should add a boyish air to him, but there was no disguising that hard jaw-line or stern brow. His golden hair had grown long and unruly over the year, removing any hint of a youthful air.

Warm cotton sat beneath her palm and she realised her hand lay flat against his shirt. He had shed his evening jacket and his necktie hung loosely around his collar, leaving a tempting V of flesh in her eye line. Her fingers tingled as she recalled touching that smooth skin. He had been firm and muscled—her husband was an adventurer, a keen horseman and hunter. He even enjoyed mountaineering and had been well travelled before marrying her. It showed in every inch of his body.

“Let me escort you upstairs. We don't want you breaking your neck.”

Emma swallowed and removed her hand from his chest. His arm left her waist and icy coldness washed over her. How long had it been since anyone aside from a maid had touched her? Goodness, she could hardly remember. Her parents had never been the type to offer physical affection, nor any type of affection really.

But then he offered her his hand and she took it. Emma sucked in a breath to her air-starved lungs and held it. His fingers were warm and coarse against hers. Whatever he had been doing this past year, the roughness of his fingers told her he hadn't given up his adventurous ways. What else had he been doing though? Seeking adventure with other women perhaps?

The candle held firmly in his other hand, he aided her up the stairs that turned a corner twice before bringing them to the next floor. Alexander didn't release her fingers until they stood outside her bedroom door. She glanced up and down the darkened corridor. A cold breeze nipped at her ankles, even through her thick stockings. That was nothing new. Heating the entire castle cost too much so she only had fires lit in the few rooms she used frequently. Hopefully her bedroom would be nice and warm and she had ordered one lit for the duke in the master bedroom.

"You sleep here now?"

"Yes," she whispered.

The master bedroom had seemed too big for her once he left. They had made an attempt at sharing a room—and a bed—in their first month of marriage, but sharing a room with him had been the most uncomfortable experience. Lying next to him, listening to his breaths and wondering how to be a better wife, wishing she had more courage had nearly sent her to tears every night.

"I see."

"Well"—she glanced around, hoping to spot one of the maids, but the corridor remained silent save from the slight flutter of the curtains — "goodnight then."

"Is something amiss, Emma?"

She licked her lips. Should she admit she no longer had a lady's maid? They had few servants left after she'd been unable to increase their wages. Those who remained were fiercely loyal to her and she considered them friends but how much longer could she expect them to work for a pittance?

"I need someone to undo my dress and...and my corset."

Uncertainty dashed across his face and he too swung his gaze about. "Your lady's maid?"

"She no longer works here." She braced herself for a scolding or a demand for answers but none came.

Instead he dropped his gaze briefly to his feet before lifting it and

locking gazes with her. "Go into your room. I will help."

"You, Your Grace?"

"Yes, me. I'm your husband, am I not?"

Emma nodded slowly and turned to enter her room. Sure enough the fire was lit, casting a warm glow about the pretty room. It was the most feminine and well-looked after of the castle rooms. Most were cold and damp with dark wood panelling and large medieval furniture, but this one had been used by the previous duchess and was decorated in a duck egg blue shade with white painted furnishings.

The door shut behind her and she could not bring herself to turn to face Alexander. He was right, he was her husband after all, but he had not touched her properly since he'd left. And even then, their time together had been limited. For the hundredth time, she regretted she didn't have a better understanding of how to be a good wife.

His hands came upon her waist and she tightened her muscles so as not to jolt from his touch. Her pulse pounded in her ears and tingles licked over every inch of her until they gathered between her thighs. The sensation was not unfamiliar. She had always felt it when he touched her, even on their first meeting at her come-out ball, but had never known how to act upon it.

Some curls had escaped her tightly coiled braids and Alexander swept some aside to start working on the small buttons at the back of her gown. His fingertips brushed her neck and she shuddered. His breath teased her neck and his scent wrapped about her. He must have bathed before dinner as he smelled of soap. The strongest urge to lean back into him and inhale struck deeply.

How would her husband react to such an act? Would he push her away in disgust? Stiffen and look annoyed with her? She hardly knew.

The crackle of the fire seemed unusually loud as his fingers worked down her back, popping each button as though he had all the time in the world. Her breaths rasped in her throat and any thoughts of the night being cold deserted her. All of a sudden, it was entirely too hot in her room.

Air brushed the top of her back and he pushed the sleeves of her evening gown down. In spite of still being in her chemise and corset, with the skirt still hanging from her waist, she felt exposed. It excited and unnerved her.

His hands came to the waist of her dress and she dug her teeth into her bottom lip.

"Shall I...?"

"No! Just my corset, please."

He could unbind her corset and leave her relatively covered. He had already seen her naked several times, she reminded herself. She was no virgin. Well, hardly. How many times had he bedded her?

Four, five times? Did that even count? But right now she could not bear to be so...vulnerable. He had her at a disadvantage with the effect he had on her.

A muttered curse came from him, and she bit back a giggle. She had never heard him curse before. He had always remained so proper around her. She had to admit she was a fine one for cursing—not very becoming of a duchess, but who was around to hear her?

“Forgive me, these laces...”

“Yes, they are a bother.”

“I wonder why you wear these contraptions when we have no company.”

He said this as though he was speaking to himself, but she answered anyway. “I’ve worn corsets for so many years, I do believe my insides would fall out if I did not.”

Alexander’s sharp bark of astonished laughter sent a curl of warmth into her stomach, further heating her body. But it was not an uncomfortable, itchy warmth that begged her to flatten herself against him. It was a sweet, subtle one that made her feel as though her insides really were mush and in danger of doing something they shouldn’t.

Her ribs expanded as the corset came loose and she tugged it forwards and off to fling it aside. He laughed again and put his hands to her waist.

“You feel perfectly normal.”

“Well, thank goodness for that.”

She turned, his hands still upon her, unable to rid the smile from her face. When she met his gaze, she noted his eyes were crinkled in the corners and the smallest smile teased his lips. A tingle ran from her head to the ends of her toes.

Then he glanced down. When his gaze returned to hers, the crinkles had gone and his brown eyes had grown hooded again. He peered at her down his nose. Emma peeked down to try to understand what had triggered such a reaction. Her dress hung from her hips and her breasts stood out against the cotton of her chemise. Her nipples were hardened points.

Emma heard his ragged intake of breath. She tucked her bottom lip under her teeth. Had she embarrassed herself? Did he like the sight? What should she do? Before she could decide, Alexander dropped his hands and backed away. He stumbled into the door and if she had not been so disappointed, she might have giggled.

“Uh, goodnight, Your Grace, uh, Emma. Sleep well.”

He turned, yanked open the door with a muttered curse and stalked out. Emma stared at the empty spot where he had been for several moments before stepping forwards and shutting the door.

What had just happened? She should have taken advantage of the moment, if only she understood better how to handle men. If she was to ever put an end to her loneliness, she needed to persuade her husband to join her in her bed.

Tomorrow, she told herself. Tomorrow she would do a much better job of being a seductive, beautiful woman. Talking about her insides falling out? What had she been thinking? Her sense of humour really was terrible. No wonder he wanted to escape as fast as he could. But if she was ever to get what she hungered so badly for, she would have to watch her tongue and work harder to lure her husband into bed.

She patted her flat stomach. Before the festive season was over she would have a child growing inside her. Someone to love and take care of. Whatever she had to do to entice her husband, she would do it, because the gift of a child would be worth every moment.

Chapter 3

Emma hadn't risen from bed by the time Alex finished his breakfast and had spoken with the butler on the state of the house. All was well, he was assured. Her Grace was a fine mistress, but the year had been a hard one. Alex could not be so sure. Balmead had always been a profitable estate. What was she doing with the money? He would have to take the time to sit down and go through the accounts before the festivities began.

He took a moment to study the bare drawing room. He had struck on an idea last night while he had been attempting to sleep. The lack of decorations bothered him. Their families would be joining them shortly—there being only three days until Christmas day—and the ramshackle state of the house would be apparent to them all. But a few more decorations would certainly disguise the fact to a point.

He paced the room and eyed the far corner. The perfect spot, he decided. Besides which, the thought of standing around, waiting for his wife to rise, only to sit in uncomfortable silence grated on him. He'd far rather be outside in the fresh air, doing something active. Sitting had always been his least favourite occupation.

Alex yawned. Not to mention he needed to wake up and when he glanced outside he saw the snow had started again. The layer on the ground was not thick enough to prevent travel but it would be freezing. Perhaps that would rouse him fully and dampen some of his heated imaginings. It was no bad thing to be attracted to his wife—not when he intended to seduce her and get her with child—but it made him a bumbling fool. Instead of using last night to get her into his bed, he had ended up nearly tripping out the door and making some insipid joke. He should have been speaking of her beauty or kissing her or something...anything!

Still, that smile and her laugh had been...pleasant. It had rung in his ears and imprinted in his brain for the rest of the night. So not only did he have to contend with being aroused, he had to spend the

rest of the night imagining her laughing and smiling at him more often. He wasn't sure he had known she was capable of laughing.

Striding through to the back of the castle, he came to the store room at the side of the kitchen. The scent of toast and bacon still hung in the air and the cook lifted her head to acknowledge him as he brushed past where she was pounding dough into submission. Flour puffed up and filled the air, mingling with the morning sunlight seeping through the back windows.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

"Hannah, how are you?"

"Can't complain, Your Grace."

The old woman had worked at Balmead and sometimes the ducal estate in Surrey since he was a boy. Her bony hands dug into the dough with surprising ferocity. He always thought she looked as though she could do with sampling some of her own food but suspected he'd get a clip around the ear for saying so. His rank as duke meant little to her, not when she had spent many hours chasing him around the kitchen after she found him climbing onto tables to steal pastries and treats as a boy.

He paused and turned to lean against the rough oak table in the middle of the kitchen. "I'm glad to see you are still here, Hannah."

"You couldn't get me to leave if you tried."

"All is well then? The duchess treats you well."

The grey-haired woman's brows rose and she nodded. "Of course. I don't put up with nonsense, you know that."

"Well, it seems half of the servants thought otherwise."

She waved a flour-covered hand at him. "Ah, some of them wanted to go onto pastures new. The duchess helped them find new work. You know what youngsters are like. Well, of course you do, you're still one yourself really, and you certainly have never been able to stay in one place for long. Besides which, we do just fine on our own. We hardly need a large household to look after one lady."

Alex wasn't sure why but he felt like he'd just been scolded for questioning the duchess's approach to household management. For some reason, his staff appeared incredibly loyal to her. Did they not know of her lover? Perhaps he was no longer around. Surely if Hannah had realised Emma was keeping a lover, she would not be so loyal. Hannah was as old-fashioned as they came.

"Do we have an axe?" he asked, pushing away from the table and peering into the store room. Several old boxes and trunks cluttered the space and the odour of damp stone made his nose wrinkle.

"Aye, Your Grace, behind the box of candles. Freddie has several though he may well have taken the best one to finish chopping the firewood today."

Alex nodded and stepped into the dank storage room. He sneezed as he inhaled the dust in the room. It had once been the toilets many hundreds of years ago, he had been told, but now the stone ledge had been planked over and was used as shelving. He hefted the box of candles aside and spotted the axes in the gloom. Grabbing the first one, he weighted it in his hand and smiled. That would do nicely.

He ducked out of the room to see Hannah shaping the ball of dough. "My thanks, Hannah. If anyone should ask for me, I shall likely return within an hour or so."

"Where are you going, Your Grace?"

"I'm going to see if I can't find a fine tree for the drawing room."

The cook's face lit up. "Oh, lovely. The duchess didn't want to pay to have one brought in and none of us have had the chance. I hear they're quite high fashion in London now."

"Yes, and in Germany and France. They always tend to do these things first."

"If I finish up these pastries in time, I shall string some berries and there's some small candles and holders in there somewhere." She thrust a white finger towards the storage room. "Oh, if only we had children coming. I could wrap up some sweetmeats to hang."

He grinned. "That sounds a grand idea and I wouldn't complain about there being some sweetmeats."

Hannah gave him an indulgent smile and he felt about seven again. "And the duchess may have some ribbon scraps. I am sure she would love to help."

His smile dropped. Damnation, if he was to seduce his wife, the idea of her helping with something should not terrify him so. The trouble was, he feared getting angry around her and he feared making a bumbling idiot of himself.

He strode off and found the butler waiting for him in the hall with his thick coat, hat and scarf. He ignored the hat—it would only hinder him—but stuffed his arms into the coat and wrapped the scarf tightly around his neck. He passed over the axe to a stony-faced Hampton and pulled his gloves from his pockets to put them on before retrieving the axe and offering a jaunty salute to the grim man.

"Toodle pip, Hampton."

Alex could not help but grin to himself at the butler's bemused expression. He trudged out into the increasing snow and watched his breath puff into the air for a few moments.

When he was far enough away from the castle, he turned to eye the building. His gaze naturally drifted to her window but he saw her curtains were still drawn. It should not have done, but it annoyed him she had moved into his mother's old bedroom. In spite of them hardly knowing one another when they married, he'd hoped they would have

a better relationship than his mother and father.

It seemed history was to repeat itself. Except his wife was the one with a lover instead of himself. His father had taken many mistresses and Alex vowed he would always be faithful to his wife, no matter what. It hadn't been easy. He had met many beautiful women this past year on his travels, but none quite like Emma.

The way she bit her lips and stared at him all wide-eyed didn't pass his notice last night. Had she realised he lusted after her? That the sight of her nipples pressed against that thin cotton, and the feel of her waist beneath his hands had made him rock hard? He suspected he'd scared her. It would not surprise him after all his terrible attempts at bedding her. She probably feared he would take her to bed and she'd have to suffer him.

So how in the devil was he going to persuade her to let him bed her enough times to get her with child? And how was he going to make it better for her? He'd learned a few things in his time away in the Alps—a product of listening to the talk of drunk men mostly. But could he put anything into practice?

He couldn't help but wonder if he should not have lost his virginity to a whore rather than his wife. Or even just found someone to teach him a few things while he'd been away, but he refused to be like his father and climbing mountains and travelling for the past year hardly left him much time for more, er, sordid activities.

His breaths came thick and fast as he made his way over the hills surrounding the castle. The snow had begun to fall more heavily and was past his ankles now. His leather boots protected his feet well enough and he wore thick woollen socks but he had not seen snow like this since being in the Alps. His ears began to hurt and he tugged up the scarf to protect his face. Perhaps he should have dug out some of his proper mountaineering attire.

The tips of the trees came into view once he made it over the next hill. Like splashes of dark green against a blank canvas, they dotted the snowy landscape for almost as far as the eye could see. He hoped there were some young trees that would fit well into the drawing room.

Alex propped the axe on his shoulder and started down the slope to the edge of the woods. He might not be able to seduce his own wife, but chopping trees—or anything that involved physical activity—he was good at. If he could master mountains and the outdoors, surely he could master his wife?

Chapter 4

The silence at Balmead never normally bothered Emma. But then she did not normally have a husband in residence. With only their limited amount of staff, the only sounds that accompanied her morning meal was the pop of the fire behind her and the patter of snow against the window. She peered out at the building snow and clinked her nails against her cup impatiently. Where was he and what was taking him so long? She should have braved seeing him first thing. How was she ever to entice him into her bed if she didn't even spend time with him?

Emma sipped her tea and leaned back to peer out of the window once more. Snow was starting to pile up on the window ledge, obscuring her view so she stood and carried her cup of tea to the window to keep watch. She shook her head. All Mr Hampton has said was that he went out early with an axe. What did he need an axe for?

She tapped her foot and studied the white scenery. If there had been any evidence of the direction he had gone in, it had been obliterated by the heavy snowfall. What if he was injured or hurt? It didn't matter that Alexander had spent a year climbing mountains in France or wherever else he had been, he could still be harmed. Her stomach churned and she discarded the cup on the carved bureau.

A flash of something on top of the hill made her heart flip. She rested her hands on the sill and pressed her nose to the window. Was it him? She couldn't tell through the wet glass. Snatching her skirts in one hand, she raced to the door and hauled it open, heart thudding. Wind and snow whipped around her.

It was him. Emma released a long breath. She scowled and squinted through the heavy snowfall. What on earth was he carrying? He was a mere dark dot against the pristine white of the hills but he seemed to be pulling something behind him. As Alexander drew closer—at a frustratingly slow pace—it became clear he was dragging a tree. He had put her through all this worry for a tree! Honestly!

When he reached the door, he offered a wide grin. This time her heart flipped over in excitement. She didn't think she had ever seen him smile like that. It made his already handsome face that much more enticing. Snow clung to his fair hair and had dampened the length of it, so much of it stuck to his face.

She stepped back to let Alexander drag in the huge tree. She squeaked and stumbled farther back as a branch threatened to trip her up.

"What is this?" she asked as he released the tree and shut the door.

"A tree."

"I know but..."

"I wanted a tree." He lifted a shoulder and unbuttoned his coat.

She took his scarf from him and looked him over from head to toe. "You are soaked and you must be freezing." She found Mr Hampton standing nearby and handed him the wet scarf. "Fetch His Grace some tea will you? Or hot cocoa."

"Hot cocoa? I'm not a child."

"No, but you've been out in the cold for hours. Come into the drawing room and get warm."

"I should get the tree set up."

"You will need a bucket and some sand first. Come and get warm, then we can worry about the tree."

He stared at her for several moments, a crease appearing between his brows. Emma supposed she had never really told him what to do before, and a duke rarely had anyone tell him what to do. Still, she refused to spend her Christmas looking after a poorly duke and if she was to ever fall pregnant, she needed him in full health.

Emma took his arm and led him into the drawing room to sit him by the fire. He stared at her some more as she kneeled before him and began to draw off his soaked boots. Heat from the fire licked over her skin and further warmth flared inside, flooding her body when she glanced up at him.

With his hair darkened and curling around his face in damp tendrils, and drips trailing from his face down to his open collar, made her mouth turn dry. The collar of his shirt was damp too and almost transparent. His skin looked bronzed against it—no doubt he had gained the colour on his travels as she didn't remember him being quite so sun-kissed before.

But while a flurry of sensation uncoiled inside her, none of it could be attributed to nerves as usual. As she placed his boots by the fire, courage began to fill her. This—taking care of someone—felt so natural. She so longed to be able to do the same for a child. Motherhood had long been her dream. Her parents were hardly models of parenthood and she was determined to do a better job.

Drawing a blanket from the back of one of the chairs, she came to put it around his shoulders, leaning over him to coax him forward. Alexander frowned at her but did as she bid. One of the footmen entered and placed a tray with steaming cups on the side as she finished tucking the blanket around him. She smiled her thanks and rose to hand a cup to Alexander.

"I am quite well, you know," he grumbled and took the cup of cocoa from her.

Emma couldn't help but smile. For all his protests, he seemed happy enough to let her tend to him. "I won't have you ailing, Your Grace."

She took her own cup and sat on the chair opposite. The scene struck her as cosy. It was something neither of them had done before. Their first month of marriage had been taken up with adjusting to living in a new home and being cautiously polite to one another while doing their best to avoid moments like these.

But then, she had barely known him. Three dances they had shared before he proposed. Three. How was anyone to know someone well enough to spend a lifetime with them after a mere three dances?

"You should have told someone where you were going," she said after taking a sip of the hot cocoa.

"It was hardly the Himalayas. I only went to the woods."

"Yes, but it is so easy to come to harm in weather like this. What if you had hurt yourself or... I don't know... chopped off an arm or some such."

A brow rose and she noted the slight twitch of his lips. "I take it you do not have much confidence in my tree felling skills."

"It could happen!" Emma declared.

"Emma, I have climbed mountains and travelled through some of the harshest weather known to man. A little Scottish snowfall would not hinder me and I assure you, I have very little intention of chopping off any of my limbs."

She felt a giggle rise and she let it slip. It was not very ladylike perhaps, but she couldn't help herself and his eyes crinkled and softened. It was certainly worth that reaction to go against everything her parents had ever taught her about laughing and joking in public.

After another sip, she forced herself to keep her expression serious. "Nevertheless, I am sure you didn't do any of those things alone, did you?"

"What do you know of mountaineering?" His eyebrows darted up.

"I've read a lot. Obviously books cannot make up for the real experience, I am sure, but I know that it is not wise to climb alone."

In truth, she had read them in some hopes of understanding her husband but they had not made his motives any clearer to her. Some

form of escape, she assumed. A way to run away from her. But most men simply escaped to one of their country estates or even London. Never did they go scurrying up mountains to run away from their wives.

"You are right, and I never did. I have several fine friends from the Alpine Club with whom I travelled."

"It is odd, because I always thought climbing mountains must be to gain that sense of isolation yet how can that be when you are with several other men?"

He shook his head. "No, it was never about isolation."

"The challenge then?"

"I've always been an active man, unable to sit still for long. Even as a boy I climbed trees and got myself into all sorts of pickles. But it's the reward that is the enticement," Alexander explained and leaned forwards, his elbows upon his knees. "You should see it, Emma. You feel as though you are God. On top of the world and looking down."

"That sounds a little blasphemous, Your Grace."

The excitement dulled from his eyes and Emma regretted the words, wishing them back. She had never seen him look so alive. If only she could conjure up such a look.

"And after Christmas, what is next? More mountains."

He leaned back and contemplated her. "No, no more mountains. I have another challenge in mind."

Her husband sipped his drink nonchalantly and settled his gaze on the fire. She took in his features as the golden glow skipped over them and brought out the strong dip in his chin. His hair had dried into a wild disarray that made her fingers twitch to touch it. A challenge, he said. She had set herself one of her own, but it was unlikely her challenge was anything like his. Alexander was a man of action. Could she possibly be a woman of action? Could she really seduce her erstwhile husband and achieve her own dream?

Chapter 5

Alex's gaze had slipped to study Emma several times while they finished their drinks. He'd never seen this side of her before. Well, in truth, he had not seen many sides to her. He supposed he had not really stayed long enough to witness anything but her cool, haughty guise. Guise? Was it a front of some sort? Or was that who she really was and this was some act? He hardly knew. The soft smile on her face, the way she spoke with so much curiosity appeared genuine, but then was this not the woman who had run into her lover's arms a mere month after their wedding day?

He placed the empty cup back on the tray and raked his hands through his hair. He was warm and dry enough but it was sorely tempting to sit by the fire and steal glances at her all day. The glow of the flames brought out golden highlights in her hair and warmed her pale skin. The gown she wore was also a golden colour and she gleamed like an angel on top of the tree.

It was an enticing picture indeed, the beautiful wife, the snow outside, the roaring fire and sweet, hot drinks. There were times on the mountains when he might have been more willing to turn around and return home if he knew this was waiting for him.

Clearing his throat, he stood, causing the blanket to slip from his shoulders. She lifted her gaze to him, those blue eyes so wide and wary. For all the progress they had just made, he had a long way to go, he feared.

"Where are you going?" A tremble sat in her voice, and he wondered if she did not expect him to storm out the door at any moment and head back to the mountains.

For all his time spent away, he had to wonder if he'd made the right decision. Should he have stayed and risked humiliation to try to woo his wife? Perhaps, but then he had never been the type to think much through. Which was exactly why he would not fall foul to his impulses now. His seduction of Emma would be carefully thought out.

If only he had some idea where to start...

"I'm going to fetch a bucket. I'd like that tree up before our families arrive tomorrow."

Emma glanced at the window. "I fear they shall not make it if this weather continues."

He grimaced to himself. The snow fell thick and fast and soon the roads would be impassable. As it was, they would hinder the carriages so much so that they would be lucky if their families arrived in time for Christmas Day. Alex had no particular fondness for his cousins but he should have liked to have seen his mother and if he was left alone with Emma, what in the devil would he do with her? It was not as though he could spend the entire festive season seducing her.

"I'll be a moment." Alex found Hannah stringing some berries as promised and she had even parcelled up some sweetmeats. "Wonderful work, Hannah." Alex snatched one and stuffed it in his mouth as he went by and she tutted at him. He found the bucket he'd spotted earlier in the storage room.

"I'll send one of the maids to fetch the rest of the decorations. Are you nearly done?"

"Yes, Your Grace. Just a few more berries to go," the cook said.

Grinning, he snatched one more sweetmeat, scarcely avoiding a tap to the hand. When he returned to the drawing room, he found Hampton and one of the footmen dragging in the tree as Emma directed them. The butler looked on the verge of keeling over so Alex swiftly took over after placing the bucket in the corner of the room.

"We weren't sure where you wanted it," Emma said.

"This corner will do perfectly."

She twined her hands together and glanced up at the ceiling. "I hope it fits."

"It will do fine," he said as he wrapped his arms around the base of the tree. "Hannah had some decorations and she said something about candles."

"I shall fetch them from her in just a moment."

"Oh, I said to get one of the maids," he muttered as they began to heft the tree up.

One of the branches nearly poked his eye out and the needles jabbed through his clothes. He hoped this tree was worth it. He felt ridiculously excited about it—like a schoolboy on Christmas Eve—but it had been years since he'd had a Christmas tree. It hardly seemed the sort of thing a bachelor bothered with.

"Careful," Emma exclaimed as they began to lift it and the top grazed the wrought iron chandelier above, sending it swinging on creaky hinges.

With a few curses and lots of grunts, Alex managed to wrangle the

tree into the bucket. Hampton had already arrived with a decent amount of sand likely scrounged from one of the fire buckets, and he poured it around the base until the tree was steady. Alex took a moment to step back and admire it. It was a little on the large side, but once he pushed aside the chaise, it would be just fine.

"Thank you," he said to the footman.

When he turned to Emma, he found her digging through a trunk and drawing out some ribbons. "Oh look what Mr Hampton found. Isn't he clever?"

Alex strode over and peered in the trunk. "I didn't know we still had these. I remember some of these decorations from when I was a boy. Mother wanted to be as fashionable as all the London houses and spent a fortune having decorations sent over from Germany."

"They are beautiful," she said, lifting out some baubles and finally a large star.

Alex had to pause as his heart did a flip in his chest. Light reflected off the star and over her face. She was radiant, stunning...heart-stopping. He'd always known his wife was beautiful, but the look of wonder on her face combined with the sweetest smile had him convinced he had never quite seen her true beauty until now.

Her gaze locked with his and her smile wavered. He noted the faint flutter of her pulse in her neck. Did she look at him and feel this same attraction? If she did, why had she taken a lover? Did she love the man?

He broke the connection and turned back to the tree. "We should put the candles on first."

"Should we not put the ribbons on before?"

Hands on his hips, he pivoted and nodded begrudgingly. "Yes, I suppose so."

They worked silently for some time, looping the ribbons and berries before hanging the baubles and placing the candles and their holders about the tree. Emma lifted the star again. "Would you like to put it on? I don't think I am tall enough."

He eyed the top of the tree and conceded she was certainly far too small to reach. But for some reason he felt it important she place the star on the top. After all, this had been his idea and she had willingly helped. "I could lift you," he suggested.

The sweetest smile slipped over her lips. Alex had to wonder if this woman really was capable of deception at all. He could not imagine this attractive, sweet thing betraying him with a lover.

"Very well then."

She came to stand in front of him and he turned her around with his hands to her waist so they stood with their sides to the tree.

"If you put one hand to my shoulder it will be easier," he told her,

then clamped his teeth together as a surge of need rolled through him. Having her delicate waist underneath his palms, feeling each of her breaths fired his desire. He longed to see her body again and, this time, use it properly.

All in due time, he reminded himself.

He lifted her with ease—she was a light thing after all. Once she had placed the star on top, he lowered her to the ground, her body sliding down his. His teeth crashed together so hard, he feared he'd shattered every one of them and would have to live off soup for the rest of his life.

Hands still on her waist, he gazed down at her. She lifted her chin and met his gaze. There was no apprehension, only the darkening of her pupils. This was it. He could start his seduction here. Here, now, with her breasts rising and falling against him. Could she feel his arousal? It felt as though it might burn through his trousers, it was that hard and hot. If she did, apparently it didn't scare her.

When he removed a hand from her body to cup her cheek, he realised his fingers trembled. Soft, smooth, the feel of her skin against his rough palms summoned memories of her in his bed on their wedding night. He had been more nervous than when facing a steep climb with little more than an axe and a rope, and she had been the same. They had fumbled their way through the act and he was left in no doubt she had found it painful and tiresome.

But as he cradled her face, her lips parted and her lashes fluttered. He saw no nervousness, and certainly no repulsion or boredom. Perhaps her lover had left her and now she was in need of satisfaction. That might explain her reaction to him. As strong as his desire was—and his need to get her with child—he did not like the thought of her jumping from his arms into another. In fact, it made him feel downright primeval. Words like *mine* tumbled through his mind. Thoughts of the threats he might use to send her lover away swamped him.

And then he recalled the soft woman in his arms and those thoughts vanished. He lowered his head and dropped his gaze to those succulent lips. He ached to taste her. Her lids drooped closed, fanning her lashes against her perfect skin.

Alex closed his eyes too. A pain jabbed his skull and he released her with a start. "Goddamn it."

"What's the matter?" she stared at him, that wary look returning to her eyes.

He rubbed the sore patch on his head and kicked the offending object—the star. They must have jostled the tree and knocked it loose. "Bloody star dropped on my head." Emma put her hand to her mouth and he saw her eyes crinkle. A muffled laugh escaped and he glowered

at her. "Not funny."

She bent to retrieve the star before he could take out his anger on it further. "Come here." She used a hand to coax him to bend so as to view his head. "No damage," she said after sifting through his hair.

Alex righted himself and massaged the ache in his scalp. "Bloody star," he muttered again. To think he had been that close to kissing her. The rest of his body ached too. One kiss might have led to something else and then he could have been bedding her tonight. Doing his husbandly duty and all that.

Eyeing the star, she smiled. "I don't think it is the bloody star's fault. It's probably more likely mine. You should be cursing me, Your Grace."

He eyeballed her for several moments. Had his icy—and admittedly sometimes sweet—wife just cursed? He released a laugh, unable to prevent it. "Bloody wife," he said, snatching the star from her and putting it firmly on top of the tree.

Her responding laughter sent a curl of happiness through him that he had not thought possible. Was there a chance that there could be more to their marriage than a need for heirs? The thought certainly appealed.

Chapter 6

By late evening, the snow was at least six inches deep by

Alexander's reckoning. Their families would not make it to them for Christmas Eve. Emma had agreed she would not even wish them to try in such weather. They would surely get trapped in the snow. Which meant they would be alone until the snow thawed.

As she peered out of her bedroom window, she wrapped her arms about her. That meant time alone to seduce him. If only she really understood what she was doing. Starlight reflected off the snow, making it glow, and it seemed the entire world had to be white. It was magical. Like a fresh start. Washing away the previous world and starting anew. Was there a chance they could too?

Alexander had wanted to kiss her. And she had wanted to kiss him. He had charmed her with his excitement about the tree, the way he seemed like a giddy little boy. Not to mention watching him lift that tree with ease had sent the most delicious tingle through her body as she watched his arms strain against his shirt. Then he had lifted her. Oh goodness. She nearly swooned.

He had been hard against her—his body and his arousal. He wanted her. Perhaps he had not visited with any women this year and was in desperate need of release. Or maybe he saw her as something more than his cold wife. She understood how people saw her, but she knew of no other way to be. If she didn't watch every word that came out of her mouth, she was likely to blurt something foolish.

The hope that Alexander saw through her shyness and understood it was just that, burned bright but she would be wise not to cling to that. No one had ever figured out that she was not aloof but she simply didn't know how to converse easily.

Drawing open her robe, she chewed her lip as she eyed the slip of silk she wore. She had never owned anything like it. It was red—a festive colour perhaps, but utterly scandalous. It clung to her body and revealed the curve of her breasts. If her mother ever saw it, she

would declare her a whore.

But whore or not, she needed to draw her husband into her bed somehow. If this didn't work, she didn't know what would.

A footstep on the stairs made her heart bound. She left her robe deliberately untied and drew open the door. She had to meet him at the opportune moment. Several candles remained lit on the console tables lining the hall, ensuring he saw her clearly enough.

Dinner had been pleasant enough, but there had been no chance for her to make any sort of attempt at seduction. She refused to leave anything to chance.

Emma counted his steps and when he was on the final one, she slipped out of the door and walked leisurely down the hallway as though heading to the stairs.

She paused when she saw him. "Oh, Your Grace. I thought you were abed." Emma winced at her sugary tone.

He froze, a hand curled around the banister. "No." His voice came out strangled.

"I was just going down to the..." She trailed off when he began to move, swiftly, silently, like a wolf stalking his prey.

Alexander came to stand in front of her and his gaze raked her. The chilly hallway now felt as though it was lit by a thousand fires. Her skin blazed and her breaths quickened.

"What are you doing out of your bedroom?"

"I...I..." The excuse she had conjured should he ask had flown from her mind. All that existed was a great ache and a mist of need crowding her vision.

In his shirtsleeves, his collar open, his too long hair tousled, he was everything she desired. Everything she wanted. Now thoughts of conceiving a child seemed second place to simply having him in her bed and between her thighs. She pressed them together to try to ease the growing ache.

"You are very red," he murmured.

The words might have made her giggle had they not been said with such seriousness or had his voice not sounded thick and gravelly.

"I..." Oh Lord, could she say nothing? Something, anything, to coax him into her bedroom. "It is silk." Inwardly, she groaned. That was the best she could come up with? "It feels nice a-against my skin."

"Does it indeed?" His gaze was still transfixed on the article of clothing, if it could be called that. He reached out and pressed a hand under the robe to cup her hip. "So it does."

Emma released a soft moan. He closed the gap, slipping his hand farther around her back and splaying his fingers so they brushed her rear. She wore nothing beneath the chemise and he must have felt as much as he drew in a harsh, audible breath.

Pressed against her was hard muscle. Everywhere. Against her thighs, her breasts, her hips. And another hardness too. It made her skin prickle with heat. She lifted her chin and...

"Excuse me, Your Grace."

A soft curse came from Alexander and he released her. They jumped back like children caught stealing treats from the Christmas tree. Mr Hampton stood, looking severe, at the top of the stairs.

"I saw the candles were still lit and wanted to ensure they were put out."

The duke nodded stiffly, and Emma fought the desire to bury her head against his chest. No doubt her cheeks were redder than her chemise.

"Right. Thank you, Hampton."

Emma thought Alexander didn't sound grateful at all. He had wanted her, had he not? If only she was brave enough to simply take his hand and lead him into her bedroom. But she was not. Instead she offered him an apologetic smile and drew her robe around her waist. Disappointment flared in his eyes.

"It's late. I should get to bed. Goodnight, Mr Hampton. Goodnight, A-Alexander." His name felt hot and heavy on her tongue and when she saw the way desire lit his gaze once more, she determined she would use it more frequently.

"Good night, Emma." Raw need echoed in his words.

"Goodnight, Your Graces."

The butler's disapproving stare quickly doused any further ideas of trying to coax Alexander into her bed and she scurried back to her room. Shutting the door, she pressed her back against it and put both hands to her hot cheeks. To think, if Mr Hampton had not interrupted, she might be drawing off her chemise and slipping into bed with her husband.

She should have ignored the butler and just done it. Oh, she wished she were braver.



Alex scowled at the white scenery as the footman, Jacoby, tied his necktie. The man did an admirable job considering looking after him wasn't his duty, but it still aggravated him that his old valet was no longer here. Not that he had needed the man much, but it was inconvenient for them both. Surely Jacoby had better things to be

doing?

The snow had stopped at some point during the night, leaving drifts piled up on the windows. Snow weighted the trees on the horizon and every now and then clumps dropped from the roof, no doubt disturbed by the odd robin or some other creature, for the temperature was too cold to allow for any melting.

He took a moment to eye his reflection in the floor-length mirror. Damn the footman, why had he chosen him a red and gold waistcoat? Now all he would think of all day was Emma in that ridiculous slip of a...what in the devil was it? He'd never seen the likes of it. Not that he really thought it ridiculous. Well, perhaps he did, but he also thought it enticing and riveting and all kinds of other words that might summarise the way he had been taken under her spell. The way the red silk had caressed her skin and revealed the curves of her breasts and hips...

He had to stop this or he was going to spend the rest of the day as hard as a stone.

Bloody Mr Hampton. He should have told the butler where to go. Preferably to his bedroom, far away from them, while he saw to his wife. Emma had wanted him, he'd been sure of it. Every inch of her body had said as much, as had the moan that had slipped from her as he pulled her to him. He pushed a hand through his hair, mussing up the fine job Jacoby had done of combing it. This was hardly the behaviour of a woman with a lover waiting in the wings.

The footman slipped a cufflink in through his shirt sleeve then set to work on the other. Alex eyed the man, who was relatively young and handsome, though older than the man he had seen Emma with. Damnation, he would start seeing potential lovers in every man if he was not careful.

"Are you happy at Balmead, Jacoby?"

"Of course, Your Grace."

"Why haven't you left like the others?"

He paused and released Alex's cuff. "I have a wife in the village."

A wife. Alex tried not to grin at the news.

"There would be no sense in me leaving and I've worked here since I was a lad."

"So you don't wish for more wages or a different job?"

Jacoby's shoulder's stiffened. "Those who left went to the towns. Edinburgh, Glasgow, even York I believe. It's not uncommon now. A lot of the households are losing staff to the jobs in the cities but it doesn't appeal to me, and why should I? I earn enough to keep me and my wife in comfort, and Her Grace keeps us well."

"She looks after you then?"

"Of course, Your Grace. I doubt many who left found a mistress as

kind as she.”

The disapproving tone in the footman’s voice told Alex he didn’t agree with anyone choosing to leave. Could it be his staff simply wished to move on and it had nothing to do with Emma’s mismanagement of the estate? He needed to look at the finances, and soon really. Christmas Eve or not.

“Does the Her Grace have many friends?”

“Friends, Your Grace?”

“Visitors? Does she spend time out of the house much? Does she visit with people?”

“Not really, Your Grace.” Jacoby looked a little flustered as he helped him slip his jacket on and adjusted Alex’s necktie. “She is very busy. The duchess spends most of her time in the library though she does visit the villagers when she can.”

Alex nodded and felt some of his anxiousness slipping away. Servants knew everything. And Mr Hampton was not the type to let ill behaviour slip past him. Surely if she was still seeing her lover, there would be talk of it. Had she changed perhaps? Grown up? Emma certainly didn’t seem the type to be frivolous and foolish in her behaviour now, but then what had he ever really known of her? Nothing. He had proposed to her because their families wanted the match and he deemed her attractive enough. That had been the sum of his knowledge.

Sometimes, he could not help but blame himself for the disaster that was their match. He should have taken the time to get to know her before proposing marriage. He sighed and straightened his jacket. And, yes, he really shouldn’t have disappeared at the first sign of trouble. His only excuse was being inexperienced and young. Not that a year counted as a huge amount of experience or time, but his travels had certainly matured him and the company of the men at the Alpine Club had taught him much.

“Thank you, Jacoby, that will be all.”

The footman left and Alex took one last look at his reflection. Mistakes had been made, many of them on his behalf, but he would make up for that. If there really was no lover waiting around, he might have a chance at making this a real marriage. It was Christmas Eve, and he was going to seduce his wife.

Chapter 7

He was surprised to see Emma already breakfasting when he entered the dining room. She had arisen so late the previous day he assumed she arose late most days. Behind the large dark mahogany table and in front of the oppressive wood panelled wall, she appeared delicate, almost out of place. Too fine for a dining room like this. He really had done her a disservice keeping her shut away in Scotland for a year.

There was no red on her today, no slip of silk, though she looked as beautiful as ever—if not more. When she had become quite so beautiful to him, he wasn't sure. Her attractiveness had always been apparent, but he had regarded it with a cold kind of fascination. Her normal rigid expression had always turned his heart to stone.

But today, his heart warmed at the sight of her in another green gown. Trimmed with ribbons and with tiny buttons down the front, it warmed her cool complexion, as did her smile. It was genuine, he thought. Most of her behaviour towards him yesterday had been too. Including her concern over him. It bolstered his courage.

"Good morning, did you sleep well?"

No, he was tempted to say. *No I did not. I couldn't stop thinking of you in that slip of silk nor could I cease imagining peeling it away from you.*

Instead, he smiled genially and sat opposite her. "Very well, thank you."

He spooned some sugar into the cup already set out for him and helped himself to coffee. Breakfast was laid out over the table so he piled some eggs and toast onto his plate. She eyed the large plate of food with a twitch of her lips.

"Hungry?"

"Famished."

"I suppose being out of doors for much of yesterday has given you an appetite."

Alex thought it a fine excuse and nodded, but he'd always been one for eating a lot. It was a good thing he was so active or he would be the size of a house. He nodded towards her plate. "And what is your excuse?"

He let his hand hover over his fork, cursing his thoughtlessness. Had he just insulted her? Yes, he probably had. What had he been trying to say? That she ate like a man? Or that she ate too much?

But then she laughed. He let his hand drop to the fork and he dug into his eggs.

"I always did have a large appetite, I shall admit that much, and I have no excuse like chopping down trees."

"Well, you did work hard on decorating it." He cast his gaze down the top half of her. "If you eat like that all the time, you must tell me your secret."

"M-my secret?" A flash of fear darted across her face, making Alex's insides twist.

"How you eat so much but stay slender."

Her shoulders sagged and her smile was relieved. "Oh, yes, that. I don't know really. My mother is slender, I suppose, so I must take after her."

Nodding, he stuffed the eggs in his mouth for want of any response. For a moment the lightness and joviality had been quite pleasant but then his mention of a secret had cloaked her silence. She had one, he just knew it. Was it her lover? Something else? All his hopes of pursuing a proper marriage had been dashed by that one word. If she could not be honest or... or faithful, then what was the point? He might as well get her with child and find some other mountain to climb.

"What are your plans for today, Your Grace?"

And now he was back to being *Your Grace*. The distance sat between them again, a chasm that could not be bridged. Not while secrets sat between them anyhow.

"I'm going to look over the accounts and settle some business. I'm aware I've been neglecting this estate."

And her. But he didn't say as much. They both knew it, and though she might not know he was aware of her lover, she couldn't be so foolish as to believe this was how a marriage should be. Yes, plenty of married couples—particularly those with arranged marriages—spent much time apart, but the husband never usually ran for the hills before at least getting his wife with child.

"I have looked after things to the best of my ability," she said tightly.

"I'm sure you have."

"You really don't need to look everything over. Things are quite

sound.”

“Yet my staff are leaving and the fires go unlit.”

“It was their choice to leave, Your Grace,” she said softly. “I would not stop them. And they were my staff too.”

“You could have replaced them,” he snapped.

“Why? When there was only me to look after? It seemed a mighty waste.”

Alex lowered his fork and curled a hand around his cup of coffee. He took a sip and paused to relish the warmth and bitter tang. Already it seemed to clear the ache in his head and the gritty sensation of too little sleep. This was not how one was meant to go about seducing his wife. If he went around accusing her of mismanagement, he would never get her into bed and he would remain heirless forever.

“I’m sure you have done what you can,” he replied carefully. “But it is still my estate and I should like to check things over. I will not have anyone accusing me of neglect.”

“Very well.” Emma dropped her gaze but not before he saw a flicker of worry in her eyes. She struggled to lie to him, he noticed, which again had him doing battle with his beliefs of her infidelity. Something was amiss, but he wasn’t so sure it was to do with the fellow he had seen her embracing. So what in the devil was it?

Chapter 8

It was hard not to pace outside the study door as Alexander pored over the books. Emma had tried to distract herself by going over the meal plan for Christmas Day with the cook but with only the two of them and then the small amount of servants to feed, it hardly needed much planning.

Emma then tried to pen a letter to her brother, to tell him she couldn't do it anymore. The estate simply would not cover his bills anymore. It wasn't fair to Alexander. But guilt jabbed at her and she crumpled the paper and threw it in the fire.

Was it Geoffrey's fault their father had never claimed him? Was it his fault he had been orphaned at such a young age? How could a man be expected to better himself with no education and no family for support? She was all he had. He had never really asked for anything from her, but she knew he would struggle to survive without her aid, and he was her only sibling even if they only shared a father.

She dropped her head to the desk and rested it against the cool leather for several moments. What would she do? Alexander was bound to figure out she was using estate money elsewhere and she certainly didn't want to lie to him, but no one knew of Geoffrey's existence, not even her mother. Her mother, for all her coldness, had loved her father. It would break her heart if the truth came out.

Drawing in a breath, she lifted her head and wrung her hands together. Perhaps she should just tell the duke. She hadn't been sure how he might react. With anger perhaps? That had seemed likely before. He had always seemed so annoyed with her, but after yesterday, she wasn't so sure.

Mr Hampton's voice from the hall stirred her from her thoughts and she stood to investigate.

"Shoo," came the butler's voice.

Emma put her head around the door and saw a scraggy ball of fluff trying to chew on Mr Hampton's leg. The butler attempted to shake

off the animal and his cries of annoyance grew louder.

“Shoo, bloody mutt.”

She peered at the filthy ball and realised it was indeed a dog. She strode into the hallway and the butler froze, a dog hanging off his leg.

“Oh, Your Grace, forgive me.”

Emma had to smother a laugh at the sight of the stern-faced butler trying to ignore the dog who was becoming increasingly persistent. Growls emanated from the filthy ball of fur. She was still vaguely annoyed with him for getting in the way of her seduction attempt so it was no less than he deserved, she decided.

“Is there a problem, Mr Hampton?” Her serious tone cracked into a snigger.

“No, Your Grace, just—”

The dog’s growls increased in volume when Mr Hampton started shaking his leg again. Then the study door swung open and Alexander popped his head out. “What in the devil is that noise?” He glanced down to spot the dog and he stepped out of the study. “What is that?”

“Nothing, Your Grace,” Mr Hampton said, his face as stern as ever.

Emma released a bubble of laughter and Alexander glanced at her, at first surprised, then his eyes crinkled and he grinned.

“It doesn’t look like nothing, Hampton. Would you like a hand?”

“No, Your Grace. I can manage it.” He shook his leg again.

This time the laughter consumed her and Emma felt tears welling in her eyes. “Oh, Alexander, do help poor Mr Hampton.”

Laughing, Alexander bent to try to disengage the dog from the butler’s leg. After much growling and shaking, the dog released his trouser leg only to latch into Alexander’s jacket sleeve. Emma found herself almost doubled over with laughter.

“What the devil—”

“He has taken a liking to you, Your Grace,” Emma said, swiping her eyes. “Wherever did you find him, Mr Hampton?”

“I had just stepped out to find Mr Thompson who was bringing in some firewood and this *thing* followed me in and attached himself to me.”

Taking pity on Alexander, who was having no luck getting the dog to leave him alone, Emma persuaded him to keep his arm still while she clutched the soaking, filthy dog and rubbed behind his ears.

“Be careful,” Alexander warned her. “Don’t let him bite you.”

“He won’t bite me. Just keep still. You’re scaring him.”

“Scaring him?” He looked at her incredulously. “He’s the one biting my arm.”

“Shh... Poor love, he’s so cold and wet. He’s probably worried you’ll send him back out in the cold.”

“And I won’t?”

She gave him a stern look. "No, you will not." She continued to pet the dog until he stilled and finally released Alexander's sleeve. Alexander shook out his arm and eyed the damage to his jacket with a scowl.

Emma bundled the wet creature against her, ignoring the stain he created on her gown and how damp her sleeves had grown while handling him. "Mr Hampton, will you send for some warm milk and see if we have some cooked ham from last night left?"

Mr Hampton looked as though he would rather walk over hot coals, but regardless the butler turned and headed towards the kitchens.

Carrying the dog to the drawing room, she pulled off the same blanket she had bundled Alexander up in from the chair and wrapped it around the dog before kneeling in front of the fire. "Poor creature," she cooed to the pup.

Alexander stood over her for a while as she rubbed the dog's fur. Once some of the grime was gone, his white colouring became apparent and the dog's pink tongue hung from his mouth.

"He likes you," Alexander said somewhat begrudgingly.

"He's a fine dog. Just a little mucky and cold. Poor thing."

Alexander came to kneel next to her and lifted the dog's paw before checking in the creature's mouth. The dog had become quite placid with Emma's attentions and seemed happy to be prodded and poked. Seeing the duke's large, tanned hand against the pup's fur sent a well of longing through her.

"He's not in bad health though he's only young. He's going to be a beast of an animal."

"How do you know?"

Alexander lifted one large paw. "Look at the size of these. He'll grow into them."

"Well he's only one dog. How much room can one dog take up? We won't send him back out there, will we?"

The duke's expression softened and he rubbed a hand over the dog's head. "No, no we won't."

Mr Hampton arrived with a tray and placed it on the table with a look of disgust.

"Mr Hampton," Emma called before the butler could leave. "Will you have the maids bring in and fill a small tub. I should like to clean him up."

Alexander grinned as Mr Hampton pivoted and left the room, muttering something about filthy animals. "I am assuming you mean the dog, though we are both a little worse for wear." He motioned to his sleeve and her gown.

She laughed. "I have no intention of cleaning a grown man."

“If I roll about in mud and get myself soaked to the skin, might you change your mind?”

Images of sleek, hard muscles, wet and soapy, flitted through her thoughts. The fire seemed too close all of a sudden and she drew back a little. His gaze skimmed her body and her nipples tightened against her bodice. Then his grin was back and the moment vanished. Emma didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

“What shall we call this mutt then?” he said as he stood to bring over the milk and ham.

“He's not a mutt, are you?” She cradled the dog's face and received a lick to her hands. “How about Snowy?”

He made a face and placed the milk in front of the animal. The dog wasted no time in slurping up the milk and once Alexander placed down the platter of ham, the creature wolfed that down too. “Greedy more like. But Snowy? Not very original.”

“Does it need to be original? He's white... well, sort of white, and he came in from the snow. I think it's just perfect.”

“Very well, Snowy it is then.” He rubbed a hand behind the dog's ear. “Looks like you've found yourself a new home, Snowy.”

Emma sank onto her bottom and took in the scene. Snowy scabbled his paws up Alexander's arm and gave him a long lick across his face. Her husband chuckled and fought to keep the dog at bay. Emma's heart warmed. To think she had been so intimidated by her husband. She really hadn't known him well at all. Would he understand about her brother? Was there a chance for something more than an empty marriage for them? Seeing him now, with his warm smile and crinkled eyes, she realised it wasn't just a baby she wanted from him. She wanted a proper marriage.

She would have to tell him. It was the only way. All she had to do was summon the courage.

The maids brought in a small tub of warm water and soap, placing it in front of the fire. Alexander shed his jacket and rolled his sleeves up, apparently committed to getting the filthy animal clean. Her own sleeves would not go far up but her gown was already covered in grime and melted snow, so Emma resigned herself to getting a little wet.

Together they coaxed the dog into the water and amidst splashing and a few barks, they scrubbed him clean, Alexander holding him down while she rubbed his fur. By the time they had finished, they were soaked, Snowy lived up to his name and the water was filthy.

Holding out the blanket, Emma wrapped it around Snowy as the duke handed him over. She rubbed the dog as best as she could but he wriggled quickly out of her hold and shook himself off before settling on one of the chairs, his chin resting on an arm. They both laughed.

"I guess that's all the thanks we're going to get for giving him a home."

"He does look quite right there though, does he not?"

Alexander tilted his head to view the dog and laughed. "*He* does not. *She* does, however."

"She?"

"Yes, you are the mama of a beautiful girl, it seems, Your Grace."

An ache formed in her chest. He could have no idea how much she longed for a little girl—or a little boy—to look after. This year had been the loneliest of her life. Her mother had remarried shortly before her own wedding and was enjoying her new life with her husband. Not that Mother had ever been one to take much time with her daughter. The only thing she thought could end her loneliness would be a child. But now she was not so sure. Could Alexander be the key to her happiness after all?

His grin dropped and he stared at her, his gaze seeming to reach deep inside her to pull at her heart. A wet hand came towards her and pressed into her hair that had steadily come loose from its pins. "I didn't mean to upset you," he said roughly.

How perceptive of him. She had thought him quite in ignorance of her feelings, but perhaps there was more to the duke than a simple boyish attitude and a tendency to seem annoyed with her.

"I'm not upset." Her voice was but a shadow of itself as his wet palm cradled her face. It should have felt cold but instead her skin flamed at the coarse touch. Here was the hand of a man of action. Alexander was no pampered duke, no lazy, self-indulgent nobleman. As much as it frustrated her that his passion for outdoor activity had taken him from her, she could not help admire his courage and determination.

If only he would turn some of that determination on her. But perhaps she could summon enough for both of them. Perhaps her determination to have a proper marriage would be enough.

On their knees, they inched closer. Her clothes and hair were wet and the sleeves of his shirt were almost transparent. He had several drops of water trickling down his face so she swept some away from his brow. His hand slipped around the back of her neck. She found herself struggling to remember to breathe.

Her lips parted and they both rose fully onto their knees. She looped her arms around his neck. It happened so agonisingly slowly, but she could only relish each moment as their bodies pressed together, hip to hip, chest to chest. Against the broad strength of him, she perhaps should have felt intimidated or fragile, but she felt strong, protected, as though his power fed into her.

Warm, firm lips met hers. His grip on the back of her neck

tightened. No thrum of apprehension ran through her, only a shimmer of excitement. Alexander parted his lips and coaxed hers apart to slide his tongue into her mouth. He tasted of coffee and she met his tongue with her own. The sensation of heat and warmth was enough to make her moan.

The kiss didn't last long enough, but it left her feeling hot and tingly. He did not break away entirely when it ended. He kept his hand on her neck and used the other to sweep away some damp curls from her face.

"Emma," he murmured.

Her name had never sounded so sweet before. It sounded almost like an apology, or words of love or desire. She couldn't be sure but he had certainly never said her name like that before.

"Alexander," she replied, hoping to convey some of what she was feeling in his name too. Emma was not sure what it was she was feeling, but it was new and exciting. She felt like a little girl on Christmas Eve, all tense with exhilaration and anticipation.

He drew back and eyed her. "You look like the first time I saw you."

"At the ball? I don't recall being wet and dirty."

He chuckled and fingered another errant curl. "Not but you had your hair curled like this. They touched your neck. I remember thinking I wanted to touch your neck too, or even kiss it."

Emma drew in a breath. "You did?" She didn't think Alexander had thought much of her. He'd been pushed into finding a wife and she was the most eligible woman. That had been about all there was to their courtship, she believed.

"You're a beautiful woman, Emma."

"You were very handsome. I was quite in awe of you."

Alexander's lips tilted. "And there I was quite daunted by your beauty."

"By me? But... but you climb mountains and things. How could I possibly daunt you? You're a duke!"

"Do dukes not get nervous?"

His thumb stroked along her neck sending tingles down her spine. He did it without thought, it seemed, and he had little idea of the effect it had on her. He was stoking a fire deep inside her belly, not only with his touch but with his words. Everything she had believed about her marriage was beginning to dissolve and be replaced with something much more appealing.

"I did not think you did."

"Oh, Emma." He rested his forehead against hers. "You have no idea. Of course you do not, you are still so innocent, are you not?" He drew back and eyed her seriously. "You are, are you not? Innocent?"

She scowled. What did he mean? She had been a virgin on their wedding night, but they had consummated. She was still practically a virgin in her mind, but did that make her innocent? Certainly not in the normal sense, but she supposed her experience left much to be desired.

"I... I suppose I am. I'm sorry that I'm inexperienced and that I... I displeased you."

His expression softened and he shook his head. "Do not ever be sorry for that. Never." Alexander got to his feet and took her hand to draw her up with him. "I think I should be the one apologising for displeasing you."

"You are not displeasing." But then she saw it in his gaze and realisation struck. He feared he had displeased her, not the other way around. "You were never displeasing."

True, it had not been the earth-shattering experience she might have hoped, but she had put that down to her nerves. She had been as stiff as a board and hardly knew how to react. It had been her fault, surely? But she'd always hoped they might conquer that together. Instead, he had gone to climb mountains.

"Emma, do you think that perhaps many things can be solved by simply talking?"

"Yes, I do."

"And that we never quite did enough of that?"

"Yes."

"Should we talk now?" He drew her close and tilted her chin up with his fingers.

She shook her head. As much as she knew she would have to tell him everything, because he was right, they needed to talk and she found herself keen to know. She, who never felt she had a single useful word to say, wanted to spill out everything to Alexander. And somehow she felt he would not judge her or scold her. Unlike her mother, he had never looked at her in disgust when she had laughed or talked about something silly.

But she didn't want to talk now. She wanted to touch and feel. She wanted action, not talk.

"No," she said when he didn't move. "Not just now."

He nodded with satisfaction and lowered his lips to hers.

Chapter 9

Red-hot fiery need pulsed through Alex's veins. Her lips were soft and pliant beneath his. She tasted of sweet tea. Her kiss was unpractised, honeyed, yet kindled the most unbelievable lust beneath his skin. This wasn't the kiss of an experienced adulterer.

When he'd been asking of her innocence, he'd been speaking of that. Did she understand what he meant? If she was truly innocent, then probably not. And he suspected he had been utterly wrong. Would a woman who would jump into the arms of another man so quickly after her nuptials bring in stray dogs? Would she apologise for her inexperience or kiss with such a sweet naivety?

Alex pushed his fingers into her hair and felt more of the braids come loose. He explored the inside of her mouth with his tongue before drawing back to lick the corner and nibble on her lower lip. She gasped.

Snowy barked. Startled by the dog's sound, he drew back to see the dog had awoken and looked none too happy with him. The dog barked again and again, and Alex sighed.

"She thinks you're attacking me," Emma said with a giggle.

Alex turned to stare at her for several moments, taking in her flushed cheeks and swollen lips. Snowy was not wrong. Hell, if they had continued on, he might well have taken her then and there on the floor and anyone could have walked in. Imagine the disapproving look they would have received from Hampton. He daren't think about the icy stare the butler would bestow on them. It made him shudder.

Then he eyed her filthy gown and wet sleeves, and stood. "Come, you need to change or you'll catch a chill."

"I'm fine," she said, taking his offered hand and standing. A little disappointment shuttered her gaze but surely she did not wish him to take her here like a barbarian?

"I certainly won't have you ailing at Christmas."

"But any other time you would?" She grinned.

Alex shook his head with a chuckle. She had a quick tongue and quite the sense of humour. He really hadn't known his wife at all.

Leading her upstairs, he shoved open the door and released her hand to begin pouring the bath. He turned, rested against the porcelain, his arms folded, and found her grinning at him wickedly. Now thoughts of her innocence seemed foolish, but he could not deny liking having that gleam in her eye directed at him. She pushed the door shut and closed the gap.

He reached for her and rested his hands on her hips, his head against her breasts. His heart pounded and his arousal ached. His intention had been for her to wash and change, then he would worry about himself, but she had other ideas. Should he not let her get clean and take her to bed later? Was that not the proper thing to do?

However, none of his imaginings were the remotest bit proper. He pictured her skin wet and glossy, and covered in soap. Then he thought of her straddling his legs in the bathtub. He'd heard enough bawdy talk at the Alpine Club to picture it without ever having done it himself. Their lovemaking had been confined to the bed, with him on top.

But the ideas he had were far removed from everything they had done before. He only hoped he could truly please her this time.

Emma dropped to her knees and looked up at him, her hands pressed to his thighs. The water sloshed against the porcelain tub and nearly drowned out her tiny plea to him, "Kiss me, please."

Alex took her face and smoothed a thumb along her jaw and down her neck. Her pulse fluttered and he saw her throat work, but there was no fear or apprehension. She seemed to be experiencing the very same powerful desire he was.

Dropping his mouth to hers, he kissed her until she was breathless and trembling in his arms. Then he drew her to her feet and set to work on the buttons of her dress. Emma's hair was wild and tumbling about her shoulders, her lips full and glossy. She gazed at him with utter trust, and it squeezed his heart. It had all been a mistake, it had to have been. So who was that man and why had she been embracing him? Alex cursed his impulsive nature. Why had he not simply confronted her and discovered the truth rather than running away like a silly schoolboy?

But as he slipped her gown from her shoulders and was confronted by the lacing of her corset, he understood now that he had been no better than a silly schoolboy a year ago, with little idea how to look after a wife and even less of an idea about himself. Perhaps he shouldn't have left, but he had learned a lot from the older gentleman of his acquaintance and even more about his endurance and determination. He would make this a good marriage. He would.

Turning his attention to the bottom half of her gown, he pushed it from her hips until it pooled into a green puddle on the floor along with her petticoats and bustle. She kicked the bundle aside so that it skidded across the tiled floor and hit the wall. They both laughed.

This was what had been missing, he realised, as he gazed at her glowing face. Laughter. Theirs had been a serious arrangement. One made logically and carefully. His attraction to her had simply been an added advantage. Her rank and wealth had been the primary enticement. And thus, their first night together had been a serious matter too. A sealing of the deal, so to speak. With them both being virgins, it was hardly surprising neither had done a fine job of it.

However, now she seemed more than happy to let him make up for it. He only hoped this time apart spent with worldlier men had taught him enough to please her.

Alex's hands trembled as he knelt to slip off her shoes and push down her stockings. His thumb brushed her calf as he did so and he saw her skin prick. It gratified to see he had as much of an effect on her as she did on him. Once he had flung them aside so they landed on top of her gown, he stood and placed a palm to the base of her spine. She was no more exposed to him than in her gown really, with only her ankles and delicate feet showing, yet his blood fired at the sight of her in all that white cotton.

Her nipples pressed against her combination, her breasts pressed high by the corset. Her waist was cinched in by the lace corset and he couldn't wait to free her of the confines and feel the softness of her skin.

With his hand on her back, Alex drew her into him and used a finger to tilt her face to his. "I should not take you here. It should be in a bedroom. I have much time to make up for."

"You do," she said, nuzzling into his palm.

He let his brows rise. He had half expected Emma to make excuses for him, but there were none. His meek little bride was not so meek after all, something he had been learning these past few days together. He could not help but think being snowed in together was quite the blessing.

"I shouldn't have left. I gave you too much work. I shall stay from now on. Every moment I can, I'll be here." And help her address her terrible finances, he added to himself. He had not been too happy to see the state of things. But for the moment, he would ignore their financial problems. He had much more important things to worry about for now. Like his enthusiastic wife.

"I don't expect you to hang about my skirts, waiting on me, Your Grace. But I should like to have my husband around much more."

"Enough with this *Your Grace* nonsense," he grumbled and trailed

his hand from her cheek down her arm and rested it upon her rear. The sweet give of flesh made his body pulse anew. "I am Alex, your husband, your lover," he whispered the last word as he lowered his lips to hers.

"A-Alex," she stuttered, forcing him to pause. "I must tell you—"

A rap at the door made him pause and consider his surroundings.

"Your Grace, is all well? Water is coming through the ceiling," Hampton called through the door.

"Bloody hell." He lifted his foot and stared at the puddle of water on the floor. "Damnation." He released Emma and hurried over to turn off the taps. Glancing at her half clothed state, he cursed again and lifted her gown. "Hampton, go fetch help." He waited until the sound of the butler's footsteps had faded. "Go to your room and dress. I'll have to get the maids up to empty the bath before it floods the entire house."

Cheeks flushed, gaze lowered, she nodded and hurried out of the bathroom. Alex sighed and adjusted his trousers before stomping out into the hallway to wait for someone to help deal with the overflowing bath. Would he ever get to make love to his wife? Some Christmas this was.

Chapter 10

Emma had never had such a tension-filled dinner, and that was saying something considering the early days of their marriage. Yet it was not a dinner filled with nerves or worry. It was anticipation.

Everything Alexander had said had made her feel sure his feelings towards her had changed and that perhaps he had not been entirely disgusted with her during their first few times together. Theirs had been a marriage borne of misunderstandings.

If only they had not nearly flooded the bathroom. She could not help but think that if she revealed all and they made love—properly, completely, with no fears—this could be the fresh start they needed and they'd finally understand one another.

Alexander eyed her over his wine glass with a smile. The dinner was beautiful, having intended to be for all their family, though Hannah had tried to save as much of the food as she could for the next day and save herself some cooking. The goose was far too big for the both of them, as would the turkey be but the cook refused to serve up cold meat for Christmas Day so the goose would be used for sandwiches in the evening.

The dark glimmer to her husband's eyes sent a flurry of need, as deep and as thick as the snow into her stomach. Emma felt her cheeks heat. With the lamps and candlelight glinting off his hair, he looked like the archangel Gabriel. That was almost certainly a blasphemous thought, but it could not be helped. Her husband was indeed a most handsome man.

"Cease looking at me like that," she scolded softly after dessert was brought out.

"Like what?" he asked innocently, spooning some Dariol pudding into his mouth.

A tiny fleck of it sat on his bottom lip and he dabbed it away with a napkin. Emma bit back a sigh. She wanted to lick it away and taste his lips again, to relish the almond and cherry flavour on them. The

way he kissed her... If she had been a debutante, she would have swooned. As it was, she had been close. He made her knees tremble, her chest ache. He had never kissed her like that before—with so much passion and no inhibition.

Emma glanced at the footman standing by the table with leftovers on and thought better of mentioning that he looked as though he was undressing her with his eyes.

“You know very well what.”

He laughed and threw down his napkin. “You cannot blame me. It has been a long time.”

More heat surged into her cheeks and she clapped her hands to them. At least she knew he had not taken pleasure elsewhere. He must have been faithful this past year or else he would not be so desperate for her. Besides which, Alexander had never really been able to lie to her. They skirted around so much because neither of them had the ability to tell falsehoods.

But there was still one falsehood. She needed to tell him—had been about to tell him—about Geoffrey. Then the bath had flooded and she hadn’t had the chance. Now she greatly feared ruining the evening. Perhaps when she got him into her bed later, she would bring it up. Or even while they read and had a cocoa in the drawing room. The truth had to come out, not just because he intended to stay at Balmead more often, but because if they were to have a proper marriage, he had to know all the sordid details of her family and her half-brother. It was only fair.

They did retreat to the drawing room for drinks, though Alexander had a brandy while she sipped another glass of wine. She didn’t wish to drink too much but she certainly needed the liquid courage. The scent of wood smoke filled the room and the fire cast a beautiful glow. In the corner, the candles on their tree had been lit and all the lamps and other candles were still unlit with the exception of a few on the mantelpiece. The curtains were left drawn back to give them a marvellous view of the white scenery, highlighted by a half moon. It was, in her opinion, the perfect Christmas scene.

She glanced at the bottom of the tree and saw a few parcels had been left there too. They were crudely wrapped in brown paper and string.

“Presents?”

Alexander placed his brandy down and came to stand beside her as she paused in front of the tree. He put his hands to her arms and drew her against the solid strength of his chest. Emma closed her eyes and savoured it. She still wanted a child. But Alexander had already taken away so much of that emptiness that had filled her in their time apart. She had not realised it but she was missing her husband.

"I brought some of them back from France with me. I hope you like them. I'll admit I'm not very knowledgeable when it comes to women but some of my friends advised me."

"I am sure I will like anything you give me, but I feel terrible. I only have one gift for you."

"I don't need any gifts. I hope you'll give me all I need this festive season."

She turned in his arms and rested her head against his chest. Emma could not quite believe this was the man she had so feared seeing again. He seemed relaxed, happy, content, and she felt the same. So much time wasted... She shook her head.

"You will not give me anything?" he asked, a brow raised.

She smiled. "No, not at all. I just cannot believe how much time we wasted apart."

"If it makes you feel any better, I believe it might have done us some good. Helped us mature a little. You have taken a lot on managing this estate and I learned much on my travels."

"That's very philosophical of you, Alexander, and I suppose you might be right." She peeked over at the white dog sleeping in Alexander's chair before letting her gaze linger on her husband's features. His expressive eyes made her heart stutter. "Christmas is a time for fresh starts and forgiveness, is it not?"

He nodded and plucked at a curl of her hair to wrap it absently around his finger.

"Then shall we forgive ourselves and each other and make this a fresh start?"

"I should like that very much indeed."

She stood on tiptoes and swept her lips over his. He kissed her back, firmly, briefly, before drawing back. "Will you not open a gift?"

"Now?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Any one in particular?"

"How about this one?" He bent and plucked up a small flat one.

Emma settled on the chaise and he came to sit by her as she drew open the string to reveal a small box and inside a heart-shaped locket. "Alexander, it's beautiful." She opened it to find their portraits in it, side by side. Tears stung her eyes. She had not realised until now how much she wanted this, how much she wanted them to be husband and wife in every sense of the word.

"You like it?"

She heard the uncertainty in his voice and cupped his face so she could press a kiss to his cheek. "I do, it's wonderful. Will you put it on for me?"

He took the necklace and fastened it around her neck. "I was not

sure if you would," he admitted quietly. "It seemed a rather bold gift at the time and I had thought of keeping it to myself, but I'm glad I didn't."

"Me too." She fingered the gold heart and pressed it to her chest. "I shall treasure it." Feeling emboldened by his gift and his words, and even the risk he had taken buying such a gift when their marriage had been so uncertain, she took his hand. Emma let a smile tease her lips as she took in the sight of her handsome duke. His broad shoulders begged her to sweep her hands over them, that dip in his chin called to her fingers to play over it. She longed to kiss each inch of that jaw and run her fingers through his golden hair. "Will you not come and unwrap your gift?"

A crease appeared between his brow. "I thought you said I only had one, and I don't see it here."

"It's not here." She lowered her voice and prayed she didn't seem a fool. "It is in my bedroom."

Chapter 11

Alex swallowed as they stood outside her bedroom. This was it.

She did mean for him to unwrap her, did she not? Or else he'd look a damned fool and be mightily disappointed when she led him into her room and handed him a present.

Relief still ran through him that she had liked his gift. He had picked it up in Paris and had the portraits put in it in London. At the time he had thought it might do good to remind her of to whom she was married, but he had tucked it away realising he had bitter motives behind the gift. However, after earlier, he knew he wanted to give it to her for the right reasons. A symbol of their... love? Perhaps. He half suspected if they had not been brought together by their families' and societies' expectations he might have fallen in love with her that first night. She had been radiantly beautiful but he had ignored that fact, being too laden down with expectations and duty.

Emma offered him a secretive smile and opened her bedroom door. With only the fire lit, the room was mostly cast in shadow. He regretted he wouldn't see her properly but it added a romantic feel to it and if he had learned anything from the men of the Alpine Club, it was that women loved romance. Besides, he could always draw open the curtains in the morning and make love to her then.

He pressed the door shut with his foot and paused to take in the sight of her. He had been remembering her in her under-things all day, particularly during dinner. Alex had suffered for much of that meal but found himself enjoying her company very much. It seemed they had conquered everything with the exception of the bedroom. They were able to enjoy each other's company and even talk quite openly. The marriage bed would be their true test.

His heart hammered and sweat pricked on the back of his neck. He fought the need to swipe a hand across his brow. Emma's throat worked and he noted the flicker of apprehension in her gaze. Her bold move must have daunted her too, but she had shown great courage.

Courage, he could well admire.

Inwardly he chided himself. Show him a mountain and he would climb it. Give him a beautiful, willing woman and he turned into a nervous whelp of a man.

“Come here,” he said huskily.

Emma stepped forwards and he took her into his arms. Her fingers looped about his neck and her lips immediately found his. Her eagerness made him smile and dampened some of the nerves. He took his time kissing her, learning the taste and feel of her mouth. Running his hands up and down her back, he couldn't resist rocking into her, though her skirts gave him little relief. He needed to be pressed against that soft body.

She began to tug at his necktie and he released her body to help. The room was remarkably hot and he wanted to feel her fingers on him. Once he had flung that aside, he slipped off his jacket, all the while kissing her with clumsy, desperate kisses. Next came his waistcoat and then she started to work on his shirt. If he had any doubts about her lack of experience with men, they were now erased. Her fingers were awkward and she struggled to undo the small buttons. There was no chance she was practiced at this.

Spreading apart his shirt, she laid her hands on his chest and he hissed. Her eyes widened and she went to draw them away but he captured her hands with his own. “Don't,” he begged. He needed her touch so badly.

She used her hands to smooth across his chest and down his stomach, tracing him with fascination. Desire and gratitude mingled in his gut. She had no lover. She only had him. He would be her lover. Properly, truly. Nothing could hold them back now.

Except that she was frittering away his money. But he would deal with that later. A few misspent pennies were hardly on par with having a secret lover.

He drew out his shirt from his trousers and undid his cufflinks before she helped him remove his shirt. Her parted lips and shining eyes were almost the undoing of him. Emma looked at him as though he was the only man in the world. It humbled him.

Wrapping her in his arms, he drew her close and her lips tickled a trail across his chest. Her floral fragrance surrounded him and he drew it in. How had he gone so long without her?

“You taste salty,” she murmured. “I like it.”

He groaned. Did she have any idea what she was doing to him? In that gown, probably not. He needed to get it off her as fast as possible so she could know.

Thrusting her back, he turned her, making her squeal. Before, he might have worried he'd frightened her or he had done something

wrong, but the molten lust in his veins dampened any doubts and when he pressed his mouth to the back of her neck and felt an almost imperceptible shudder and heard her gasps, he knew nothing could be wrong between them.

Alex set to work on her complex gown, his mouth pressing against the top of her neck. He let his lips linger there while he finished undoing her dress. Leaving it on her hips, he began to unlace her corset, feeling more confident now he had dealt with this contraption several times.

With that loose, he pushed down her undergarments to reveal one soft shoulder. Her skin was cast in golden perfection with the light of the fire dancing over it. He kissed a path along it to her neck, revelling in the way she tilted her head to give him better access.

Emma began to wriggle impatiently, and he realised she was trying to free herself from her gown. Apparently, he was not the only impatient one. He helped her remove it and heard her relieved, "Oh yes," that made him smile.

Her bottom pressed against her drawers, the firm outline visible against the cotton. He smoothed both palms down them and cupped her rear, drawing a startled gasp from her. He could become quite obsessed with that beautiful rear, he decided, taking the time to squeeze lightly. Then he shifted his hands around to her hips to press her against him.

She moaned. His quiet, innocent wife moaned at the feeling of his cock pressed against her bottom. Lord almighty, what had he been thinking running away when he could have been enjoying this?

He ran his hands up her body to cup her breasts and chuckled when he found her hands tugging at her corset. He took pity on her and helped her draw it off. Now only a thin layer of cotton sat between him and his prize.

That warm, supple body pressed into him as he explored every part of her with his fingers. He found she liked her nipples gently plucked and teased, and when he dipped his hands lower and slipped them under her drawers, she rocked into his erection.

Alex found her hot and wet for him. He didn't remember her being like this at all on their first night together or even the nights after. She had been stiff and quiet. Now she was moaning and gasping and rolling her hips. He let his finger skim between her folds several times, finding a spot that made her shudder and loll her head back against him.

Then he tried rubbing in circles while kissing her neck and she jerked against him and ground into his finger. "Oh, Alexander, that feels so good..."

Well, at least he knew he was doing it right. He continued,

savouring each breathy cry, changing the motion with each of her reactions until it seemed everything he did created pleasure. She brought her hands up to clutch his upper arms and dug her nails into him but she would have to tear him to pieces before he stopped. He was determined. She was the mountain and he would conquer her.

It happened suddenly. Her whole body went stiff against his and then gave way. A great cracking sound thundered through the room while she trembled and released a long breath. Before Alex had a chance to register what the noise was, a great deluge of snow and plaster swamped the bedroom. Emma screamed as he dragged her back and twisted to cover her body. They slammed to the floor and he turned his head to view the damage. Dust and snow swirled in the air and a cold breeze blew through the room.

Emma lifted her head, looking dazed. "What...?"

Alex pressed away from her and drew her to her feet. "Bloody hell, the roof just collapsed."

She peered around him, clutched his arm and surveyed the mess. It had missed her bed and hadn't even reached near where they had been standing but it was a good amount of roof that had come down. He stepped forwards, forcing Emma to release his arm, and peered at the whole in the ceiling.

"There must have been snow in the attic. There's a hole in the roof, I suspect. The weight was too much."

"Alexander, be careful."

Snow and fragments of ceiling caked her dressing table and the carpet. He shoved the larger pieces aside to have another look. The hole itself was not huge but would take a bit of work to fix.

"Damnation." He turned and eyed her barely clothed state. Picking up her robe and shaking it off, he chuckled it to her. The servants would no doubt be along after hearing that racket and he would not have them seeing her half-dressed.

Frustration burned through him. Would he ever get to bed his wife? It was beginning to look very unlikely.

"You really should have budgeted for the roof," he said gruffly as he stepped out of the room and drew her away, aware they could do nothing until the morning.

She clutched her robe about her and scowled at him. "I tried my best. I didn't know there was a hole in the roof."

"Which is why you send someone up there to maintain it. This never would have happened if you had not been wasting money. I can't fathom what you could possibly be spending so much money on but if it is fine gowns and... and bonnets or something, I shall tell you now, I won't allow it any longer."

Her mouth dropped open. She took a few steps back from him.

That dash of fear that so often haunted her expression was back and if he had been less frustrated, he might have managed to school his emotions, but he couldn't. Damn it, all he wanted was a night with his wife of nearly one year. Was that so much to ask?

"It has not been easy with you gone. You don't know what I have had to deal with, what obligations—"

"You are obligated to ensure my estate is run well. As a duchess, no less is expected from you. Instead, I return to find half my money frittered away, my castle crumbling and most of my staff gone." He pushed a hand through his hair.

Her bottom lip trembled and he waited for her to retreat, but instead she straightened her shoulders. "Had you not left and had you helped me understand the running of your estate better, I might have been better able to fulfil my role. But I had other obligations too."

"A lover perhaps?" he sneered. Even as the words left his mouth, he regretted them. The idea of a lover had been born of his own inadequacy. Since yesterday, he hadn't for one moment truly believed that. But still, he needed the reassurance.

"No, how dare you? I don't know what *you* have been doing this past year, but I would never dream of such a thing." Her breasts heaved against her robe and he saw two dark spots of colour on her cheeks. Emma glanced at the remnants of her room as a sudden gust sent a whirl of wind and snow around them both. "I will not stand here and be insulted. I shall sleep in the blue room. Good night, Your Grace."

Alex cursed under his breath but didn't beg her to return. He watched her stalk off to the guest bedroom and forced himself to uncurl his fists. What a fine mess he'd made of everything. Had he ruined any chance of happiness between them or was there still a possibility he could make up for his foolish words? He waited at the top of the stairs for the servants to ascend when he heard a flurry of activity down below. No doubt the sound had awoken them.

He would have to do something for her, he realised. Something to prove how much he cared for her. Maybe even loved her. He had been selfish in his actions, while she had been utterly selfless, remaining here and running things for him. Why, she could have gone to London or stayed with her mother, but instead she chose to stay in the wilds of Scotland and try to learn how to manage an estate. Was it her fault her husband was so childish he would not even brave being honest with her?

It was not. And so he had quite the task ahead of him to prove to her he wasn't that selfish man anymore. He only hoped he was not too late.

Chapter 12

It took Emma at least an hour of lying in the dark in the blue room

to control her breathing and rid herself of the angry fire burning in her belly. When it had left her, it also left her cold. The fire hadn't been lit in the guest room—another money-saving scheme. She braved slipping out of the cold covers to retrieve a blanket from the coffer at the end of the four-poster bed and draped it over herself. Still, she shuddered.

Why had she lost her temper with him? Why had she not tried to explain? She had intended to before they slipped into bed, but it never quite seemed the right moment. Alexander stole all reasonable thought from her with his touches and kisses. Would he understand or would he be angry with her still? She was a fool but what was she to do? Abandon Geoffrey to the world? He had nothing and no one. Should children suffer for the sins of their parents?

She did not believe so for one moment, but how was she to continue supporting him? Now she was under Alexander's watch, she could not, and she refused to lie to him any longer. But what would Geoffrey do? Well-paid work was not easily come by for a man with no education, though she knew her brother had tried hard to better himself. She wished her father had not been so selfish and such a coward. He should have claimed Geoffrey and helped him. It seemed so unfair Geoffrey should be struggling while she lived in relative luxury.

In the morning, she would tell Alexander all. Let him be angry with her, if he would. Emma tossed onto her side and fought the cold dread in her stomach while bunching the blankets up around her neck. Perhaps he would decide to leave her again and take out his annoyance on the mountains once more. After all, a man like Alexander was not designed to sit around and play lord. He had trusted her to look after his responsibilities and she had failed. That failure sat like a bitter lump of coal in her stomach.

She'd failed him and she'd failed to create a good marriage. Would she ever get anything right? Tears burned her eyes and she swiped them away before burying her head under the blankets and letting the stuffy warmth envelop her. Perhaps she wouldn't. It looked as though her lack of courage had even destroyed any chance at a good marriage. Oh, how she loathed herself.



Emma forced herself out of bed at her usual early hour.

Regardless of what had happened the previous night, it was still Christmas Day and she would not let all the cook's preparations go to waste. Not to mention they needed to at least tidy her bedroom and try to cover the hole in the roof. The hope that she might be returning to Alexander's room soon had burned bright—she never did enjoy sleeping alone—but that looked to be ruined now, so she needed to move some of her belongings into the guest room.

She rang for a maid and was grateful to be brought a cup of tea. She sipped the warm liquid and felt it flow through her and revive her. Tea was indeed the cure for much, she thought. Why men insisted on turning to strong spirits when a cup of tea did a much better job, she would never understand.

The maid chattered away, talking about the large meal Hannah had prepared for the servants and how she was looking forward to it. Once she and Alexander's meal had been served, several of the staff intended to trek through the snow to visit relatives in the village. The maid's excitement made Emma smile in spite of herself. How lucky the girl was to have a family who was desperate to see her. Emma's own mother was more interested in social pursuits and Alexander's family had intended to come more out of obligation than a desire to see their son and daughter-in-law.

She had meant to ask the maid about the state of her bedroom, but by the time the maid had finished curling Emma's hair and placed some festive green and red ribbons in it, she had forgotten that intention, such was her inability to get a word in edgeways.

Dressed in an elegant pale green gown, Emma admired her reflection in the mirror. She smoothed out the ruffles that enhanced the low neckline and skimmed her shoulders. It was a rather grand gown for the daytime but it was Christmas after all, and she wanted to look her best for Alexander. Perhaps if she looked beautiful, he

wouldn't be so angry with her for giving away his money, though would he accuse her of frittering away his money again?

Emma had never been one to use her looks—she hardly knew how—but Alexander seemed to be very attracted to her. If he wanted her anything like she wanted him, maybe there would be a chance she could persuade him she was worth staying for. She chewed her bottom lip and prayed for courage while her heart hammered against her bodice.

Once the maid had left, she retrieved the shawl the maid had brought with her and draped it about her shoulders in an attempt to ward off the chill. Emma didn't slow her pace as she walked past the closed doors of their bedrooms. She hoped he was up. To sit around and wait to apologise was more than she could bear. Tension already coiled tight in her belly.

When she entered the dining room, her heart sank. Only one place remained set, meaning Alexander had already taken his breakfast.

"Mr Hampton," she called when she had settled at the table and saw the butler slip past the room.

He paused and stood in the doorway. "Your Grace?"

"Have you seen His Grace this morning?"

"No, Your Grace."

Emma scowled. Where was he? Had he gone out? Perhaps he had decided to take a walk. Perhaps he was still angry with her. She glanced at the window and saw the snow was still as thick as ever but at least there was no fresh snowfall. When she looked to the doorway, the butler had gone, leaving her alone save from the footman standing stoically in the corner.

She tried to eat but her appetite was gone. He was going to leave her again, was he not? With a sigh, she took her cup of tea into the drawing room. She had spent far too many days eating breakfast alone and she would do so no longer. How much more pleasant would it be to sit by a warm fire at least.

Snowy jumped off what had become her chair and scrambled up her legs. Emma gave her a half-hearted pat and allowed the dog to clamber onto her lap. A heavy weight sat in Emma's chest when she spied the poorly wrapped presents under the tree. A sad smile curved her lips and she sat to drink her tea while fingering the gold locket Alexander had given her.

Oh, his gift. It was still in her room—likely buried under dust and snow. Still, she should see if she could find it. It wasn't much—some monogrammed handkerchiefs—but she had thought she ought to get him something when he sent word of his intention to return. She hardly knew him at the time so he had not been easy to buy for.

Did she really know him any better now? Yes, she thought so. In

spite of them only having spent a few days together, they were building upon their brief courtship and their first difficult month together. When they had courted, he had been kind and courteous, if a little stiff. And their first month he had been awkward and a little foul tempered. These were all facets to him. Individually, some of those traits had intimidated her, but when combined with his sensual, romantic side, she found she could quite tolerate them. After all, who could claim to be perfect? Not her, for certain. Lying to him about her brother had been her biggest mistake.

Placing down the tea, she coaxed Snowy off her lap and scowled when a thud came from upstairs. Where was everyone? With the exception of the footman in the corner and Mr Hampton striding by, the house was terribly quiet. Surely a small dinner for the two of them didn't take that much work.

There it was again. She froze and tilted her head to listen. Another thud. What was going on up there? She faced Mr Jacoby. "Have you seen His Grace this morning?"

"No, Your Grace," the footman replied stiffly as he stepped forwards to take her cup of tea and place it on a tray.

"Will you go into the kitchen and see if anyone has seen him please?"

He nodded, disconcertion coming across his face. Did he know where Alexander was? She waited until the footman had left and paused to listen to the scuffle. Perhaps the staff had decided to start clearing up her room without her. She would offer some help and see if she could not find the duke's present.

By the time she had ascended the stairs, she knew for certain that the thuds and scuffles were coming from her room. Her heart warmed a little, taking away some of the ice that Alexander's disappearance had left in her chest. The staff at Balmead—at least those who remained—were indeed a kindly bunch and she was extremely grateful for them. She supposed at least when Alexander went travelling again she would still have them. What a shame she had never achieved her goal of getting with child.

Emma pressed open the door and what she saw had her mouth dropping open. Gone was the snow and rubble and her bedroom had been restored to its former neatness. The bedding had been stripped and replaced with clean, pressed linens, and her few bottles of perfume and creams had been righted and placed neatly on her dressing table.

And in the centre of it all was Alexander, standing on a ladder, his shirt sleeves rolled up, his hair almost white with plaster dust. The thud turned out to be him hammering a thin sheet of wood across the ceiling.

“Alexander...”

He paused and lowered the hammer to smile sheepishly at her. “I’ve boarded it over from the attic. It shouldn’t collapse again and one of the stable hands helped me seal up the roof. We’ll need to get someone up there when the snow thaws but there should be no more accidents.”

“You must have been up for hours.”

She stepped into the room and swept a finger across the mantelpiece to find it clean and dust free. Tears made her vision blurry. No one had ever done anything like this for her. No one had tried to take care of her problems. The estate had been left for her to deal with, she had been left in this crumbling castle to maintain it. Even in her childhood she had been forced to make her own decisions. Her mother wanted little to do with the silly little girl she had borne and her governesses were not much better.

Alexander descended the ladder and placed the hammer down. He closed the gap between them and rested his hands on her arms. “I wanted to be sure you had a place to sleep should you wish... that is, if you do not wish to return to our marriage bed.”

“You want me back in your bed?”

“I do.”

She gazed up at this handsome man—her husband. A little dust fell from his too long hair as he tipped his head forwards and she swiped a finger down his nose to remove it. His brown gaze searched her face and she saw the uncertainty there. It seemed the duke felt just as unsure of himself as she did at times. The idea made her heart stretch. Perhaps they were more alike than she thought. After all, he favoured active pursuits over anything else and though she might not climb mountains, she was happiest when she was productive. Looking after the Balmead estate had been no easy task but she’d relished it.

“When you left, I didn’t wish to sleep in there. It felt cold and lonely,” she admitted.

“I don’t wish you to feel lonely ever again.”

She glanced around the room once more and fell against him, burrowing her head against the warm hollow of his neck. “Even if you go off and climb mountains again, as long as you promise me you shall return and join me in my bed, I shall never be lonely again.”

“I can certainly promise that, and I have little intention of spending eleven months climbing mountains again. Besides, Scotland has many for me to explore. I plan to spend as much time as possible here.”

A smile burst across her face, completely out of her control. But before she got carried away, she had to confess her secret. She forced herself to maintain a serious expression and took his hand to lead him

to the bed.

"I must tell you something, Alexander."

His own smile dropped but he let her lead him to sit down. He gripped her hand in his lap and stroked his fingers over the back of her hand. "You can tell me anything."

"The money... the estate... I have not been mismanaging it or spending the money, or at least I've tried my best not to. But, you see... I have a brother." Emma saw his brows rise in surprise. No one knew of her brother except for her and her late father. Not even her mother knew her father had been unfaithful. "My father never claimed him and his mother died when he was only eight. He found me quite by accident shortly before we married. He was in the Navy, but under a vicious, horrible captain."

"When Geoffrey came to me, he'd been beaten badly. I could not send him away so I promised him whatever aid I could. When he left the Navy, I started sending him some of my allowance. And then once we married, I had him send his bills to me so I could pay them, but we've had some lean months and it's been getting harder to support him."

Alexander rubbed a hand across the back of her neck and shook his head. "This brother, was he here after our wedding?"

"Yes, he came by briefly to tell me he'd found work in Sheffield, but it didn't last it seemed."

He closed his eyes then opened them. "I saw you two together. I assumed..."

"You assumed...?"

"He was your lover."

Emma almost reeled backwards and probably would have done were it not for his hand coming to her back and holding her up. "A lover? Oh my goodness, no! I would never... why would you... oh my."

He offered her a wry smile. "Let's just say I will never jump to conclusions again. I figured out quite quickly that I had been wrong. But at the time you were so distant and you seemed so unhappy in bed. I had no idea how to please a woman. I was a virgin, you see."

Emma found herself thoroughly charmed by his admission and any annoyance at his foolish behaviour vanished at the sight of his bashful expression. He had been a virgin too. No wonder they had struggled so much on their wedding night. Neither of them had known what they were doing.

"So I was your first woman?" she asked softly.

"You were indeed. My first and hopefully my only?"

She nodded, twisted and looped her arms around his neck. "Definitely."

Alexander wrapped his arms about her waist and drew her down

onto the bed so they lay side by side. Then he took her mouth in a firm kiss.

Alex lifted himself away marginally. "We shall help your brother," he murmured. "I shall help him find work and together we'll make this estate thrive once more."

"Thank you, Alexander. Thank you."

Unable to resist any longer, he kissed her again until her skin grew hot and her clothes were an annoyance. Then someone knocked at the door.

Alexander cursed. Then he kissed her again. Someone knocked once more.

"Damnation." He pressed away and tore open the door. Mr Hampton stood on the other side and Emma quickly came to standing and smoothed her gown with a sigh.

"Hannah wanted me to let you know that dinner shall be ready in an hour."

"Thank you, Hampton," Alexander said tightly, causing Emma to giggle.

When Mr Hampton was out of earshot, he shook his head and cursed the butler again.

"He's only doing his job, Alexander."

The duke reached for her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "One day soon, I will get you to myself. If I don't, I fear I shall turn into a raving lunatic."

She nodded. "Yes, you will. Very soon. But first we must open our presents and have dinner."

He groaned but released her hand. "Come then, let us do our duties as usual."

"Smile, Alexander, it's not all bad," she said, pressing a hand to his cheek.

He nodded and his smile warmed. "No, you're right. It's not all bad at all."

Inside, warmth swelled in her chest at his fond expression. She too burned with frustration but she also looked forward to a day spent with her husband. She looked forward to a day of no longer feeling alone.

Chapter 13

Alex did enjoy exchanging gifts with his wife. He also enjoyed the dinner. He would, however, much rather have spent the day in bed with her. Emma had proved herself to be a kind-hearted woman and it only increased his need for her. Over the festive period they had become husband and wife in many ways but one. His desire to bed her had nothing to do with siring a child and everything to do with needing to feel those supple thighs wrapped around his hips.

And any nerves he might have had were gone. One touch from Emma did that. It astonished him that now the truth was out, he felt so much more confident. It went to show how important communication was for their marriage. He silently swore never to keep anything from his wife again.

Emma dabbed her mouth with her napkin and Alex eyed her lips, recalling the taste of them. It would be wholly inappropriate to take her to bed in the middle of the day, and certainly at Christmas, but, damnation, he wasn't sure how much longer he could wait. Everything was against them it seemed.

He leaned back in his chair and peered out the window. The sun glinted off the snow and the day was bright and crisp and tempting. Almost as tempting as his wife.

"We could go for a walk?" she suggested, laying down the napkin.

Alex nodded, hoping he didn't seem too eager. He needed to get out of the house for a while and burn off some frustration. "A fine idea. I think we need to walk off some of that dinner."

Emma left to fetch her coat, hat and scarf and Hampton brought him his. He slipped on his leather gloves and wrapped his scarf around his neck then waited for his wife. He tapped his foot. There was a small cabin on the edge of the estate, he recalled. Perhaps they could walk there and get some privacy.

He allowed himself a grin. What a fine idea actually. No interruptions from supercilious butlers or roofs or flooding baths. No

distractions. It was hardly proper but they had done everything properly on their wedding night and look where that had led him. He warmed to the idea the more he thought about it, but would Emma be as keen?

When he heard her footsteps on the stairs, he glanced up and felt his smile expand. With a few strands of red hair peeking out under a green hat that matched her thick wool coat, she looked like a beautiful Christmas present. And he urgently wanted to unwrap her.

She tucked her hand in his and they headed out into the snow. Cold bit into his cheeks and his breath puffed out in front of him. A few animal tracks in the snow were the only sign of life. The peaceful serenity of it all might have calmed his impatience had he been impatient for any other reason. It was slow going. The snow was thick and reached halfway up his calves and almost to the top of her boots.

"Alexander, slow down," she said with a laugh. "This is meant to be a leisurely walk. We are in no hurry, are we?"

"No, I suppose not," he grumbled. But then he recalled he had sworn not to keep secrets from her. "There is a cabin not far from here, do you know it?"

"The hunting lodge?"

"Yes."

"What of it?"

"I wish to take you there," he said, his voice gruff and low.

Two spots of colour appeared on her cheeks. "To be alone?"

"Yes."

She released his hand and he feared for a moment she would turn and leave him, that he had shocked his quiet wife. But then she picked up her coat and skirts and began to dash across the snow in the direction of the cabin. She was hardly fast but it forced him to hasten to catch up with her. He laughed and snatched her waist to pull her to a halt.

"Where are you running to?"

"The cabin. With great haste. Come on, Alexander."

Then she wriggled out of his arms and began her clumsy run across the snow once more. Pausing to admire the sight, he shook his head to himself and raced to her side. It only took them about ten more minutes to spot the cabin not far from the edge of the woods. They half ran, half skidded down the slope towards it. As soon as they arrived at the door, Alex pushed it open, urged her in and pressed her up against the wall to claim her mouth.

She gasped and wrapped her arms around his neck to press the kiss deeper. There was no finesse to the kiss and he had no patience left. For too many days he had been trying to bed his wife with no success. Nothing would get in the way this time.

Fingers tangling in her hair, he knocked the hat from her head and tugged her scarf from her neck. He released her mouth briefly to cast his gaze around the lodge and breathe a sigh of relief when he spotted the fire ready to be lit and the thick rug in front of it. Someone had expected it to be used upon his return by the looks of it.

Though he doubted they expected him to use it for this purpose.

He turned his attention back to his wife and took in the image of her glossy lips and messy curls. "I just need to..." She grabbed the lapels of his coat and flattened her lips to his. "Need to..." he murmured between kisses, "need to light the fire."

She released him long enough to let him get the fire started. Once the flames grew and lit the dark cabin with an orange glow, he stood and locked his gaze with hers. Standing by the door, she plucked at her gloves and eyed him. He saw the heavy rise and fall of her chest, and the air in the cabin grew thick. This was it.

He drew off his own gloves and unbuttoned his coat. She followed suit, casting them aside so they landed on one of the battered chairs. He flung his on top of hers and added his hat to the pile. His necktie came next, then his waistcoat. As he began to pop open the buttons of his shirt, she flung herself at him. Her lips against his, she clutched his shoulders and Alex gripped her waist to draw her as close as her clothing allowed.

Alex didn't think he had ever undressed so quickly, and they made light work of all her skirts and blasted undergarments. Before long they were naked in front of each other. He had to concentrate on breathing as he took in her long limbs and beautiful curves. He reached out to draw her into him and recalled how to breathe when he sucked in air through his teeth.

Her nipples prodded his chest and his arousal pressed against her soft, soft skin. Alex skimmed his hands down to her back, traced her curves and cupped her rear. God, it really was the most beautiful bottom. He kneaded it and brought his mouth to her ear. She shuddered when he blew softly and tugged on her lobe with his teeth. He smiled to himself, gratified by her reaction.

Then he urged her down onto the fur rug. The dark fur contrasted with her pale skin and he took the time to stroke over her shoulders that were dusted with a few freckles and down to her breasts, before lying next to her and cupping a breast.

"Beautiful," he murmured.

She reached between them and a slim, cool hand curled around his heat. He groaned and closed his eyes for a moment. Emma was bolder than he could have anticipated. It seemed their time apart had given her courage too. She moved her hand up and down him and he wrapped his hand around hers to show her how to move. Her beaming

smile reached down into his chest and looped around his heart.

"I can't wait for long," he said, aware he needed to prepare her. He'd been dreaming of this for days now and if she kept touching him, he was sure he might lose his mind and plough straight into her.

Which he did not wish to do. He had to prove himself and make this good for her.

Skimming a finger downward as he propped himself on one elbow, he found her wet and ready. She gasped his name when his finger slipped between her folds and found that spot again. Every time he rubbed or circled it, she bucked and trembled. Alex watched her parted lips and fluttering lashes with fascination. He all but forgot the way her hand moved erratically over him.

Emma dug her nails into his shoulder and released his erection to grab the furs behind her head. Her breaths came in short, sharp pants and his blood fired. "Alexander," she gasped. "Please..."

Alex couldn't deny her, nor himself. It was time. A fresh start for both of them. With this moment, their first year of marriage would be forgotten and they would embark on a new journey together. He spread her legs further and settled between them. Her hands found his rear and urged him closer. He paused and looked down at her.

"What is it?" she asked.

He let his lips tilt. "I'm waiting for something terrible to happen. For something to stop us."

They both fell silent and waited. Nothing. Then Emma laughed and he followed suit. Bringing his mouth down upon hers, he tasted her warmth and pressed into her. He found her wet and willing, and he savoured sliding each inch into her. The tiny sounds of pleasure coming from her with each press increased the pleasure, and he had to suck in a few deep breaths to maintain control.

When he was fully inside her, he lifted on his arms to gaze at her. Those stunning blue eyes were slightly damp, and he kissed away the tears from the corners. Understanding ran between them. *I love you*, her eyes said. *I love you too*, his responded. *This is it. This is us. Our fresh start.*

He began to move, slowly at first, then with each grip of her fingers and each quiver of her body, he picked up the pace. Her legs wrapped about him and he groaned as it brought him deeper. With strong, swift strokes, he pressed her into the furs, the heat from the fire licking over their skin and turning his body slick. Alex's arms shook as the pleasure burned through his body.

Emma tightened around him and heard her draw in a sharp breath and hold it. Nails bit into his skin. She convulsed, once, twice and a third time before becoming limp underneath him. He gave in completely then, pounding into her until his release streaked through

his body and stars jumped in front of his vision.

Aware of his heart galloping against his ribs, he near collapsed on top of her and buried his head in her luscious flower-scented curls. Emma stroked his back, up and down and then brought her hands to smooth his hair from his face. He lifted his head and grinned down at her.

“Am I too heavy?”

“A little,” she admitted, “but I like it.” She squeezed her arms around him. “I like it a lot.”

“Good. I plan to do this many more times.”

“Today?”

Alex chuckled at her eager tone. “Well, it is Christmas?”

“It is indeed. Merry Christmas, Your Grace.” Her lips twitched.

“Merry Christmas, Emma,” he said softly, ignoring her teasing tone. “I love you.”

Her answering smile filled him with such happiness, he feared he was dreaming. But then she swept a finger across his lips and traced the shape of them before whispering, “I love you too.”

Alex kissed her, still buried inside her and decided he would make it a tradition from now on. Whatever was happening in their lives, no matter where they had been, they would come here every year and show each other exactly how much they loved one another. He released a grin that had her raising a brow until he began to move inside her again. Her quizzical expression soon vanished and Alex went back to showing her exactly how much he loved her. His Christmas seduction plans had not gone so badly after all.

Epilogue

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Emma shuddered and peered out of the window for the hundredth time that morning. The snow was falling heavily and the road to the house had vanished. A tug at her skirts drew her attention away from the snowy scenery. She could not help but smile as the five-year-old stuffed her fingers in her mouth and snuggled into her dark green gown.

"Will we decorate a tree soon, Mama?" Isabel said around her fingers.

"As soon as your father has gone to get one. You know he loves to do it himself, darling." Juggling the nearly one-year-old baby in her arm, she bent to give Isabel a squeeze. "I am sure he will want to go straight out and get one as soon as he returns."

"Will Papa be back soon?"

"Yes, my darling, very soon." She hoped. How would he even get through this snow? Alexander had been gone for three weeks, giving a talk on mountain climbing in London while attending to some of his duties. She was glad he'd chosen to spend most of his time instructing on mountain climbing rather than doing it. It seemed to bring him much enjoyment and she could worry less about him, though he still climbed the odd Scottish mountain.

"Can I have a sweetmeat?"

Emma released Isabel and pressed a kiss to her blonde curls before standing. "Yes, but only three. I don't want you getting sick again."

"Thank you, Mama," the little girl said before skipping out of the drawing room where the tray of sweetmeats sat temptingly on the bureau.

Allowing herself a smile, she turned her attention to peering out of the window once more. The baby in her arms wriggled and fisted his hands in her hair, making her laugh out loud as she tried to disengage

his tightly closed fist from one of her curls.

With a sigh, she turned away from the window and strode out of the dining room to the drawing room. Isabel spun around, a guilty look on her face as her mother entered. The room was fully decorated with the exception of a tree. Sprigs of greenery ran along the mantelpiece and a giant nutcracker sat to the side of the fireplace. The decorations didn't look as neat and tidy as usual with Isabel being able to help this year, but they added a nice touch to the rustic room.

Emma turned her attention to her daughter. "Isabel, did you eat more than three?"

"No, Mama," she said through a mouthful of sweetmeats. "Does Frederick want one?"

"I'm sure he does." The baby tightened his fist in her hair in agreement. "But he cannot. Besides, it will be time for his nap soon and then we can finish putting up the decorations."

"But not the tree?" Isabel's bottom lip jutted out.

"Not until your papa is home," Emma replied firmly.

"It's a fine job I am home then, is it not?"

Emma spun, her heart jumping with delight. "Alexander!"

Isabel reached her father before Emma could and he bent to scoop up his daughter and spin her around. He sat her on his hip and kissed her cheek. Grimacing, he swiped a finger across her skin. "Have you been eating sweetmeats?"

"Only a few, Papa."

Emma slipped into his other arm and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Too many." She brushed a hand over his shoulder to dust away some of the snow. "You must be freezing. I didn't think you would make it through the snow."

"I had to leave the carriage in the village and trek the rest of the way."

"Alexander, what were you thinking?"

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and dropped a kiss onto Frederick's head. The baby responded by finally releasing his mama's hair and trying to tug his papa's instead. "I was thinking I wanted to get home to my family and no snow storm would stop me."

"Well, you always were determined," she said on a sigh.

Alexander put Isabel down. "Why don't you go and find Nanny Mary. I think your brother needs a nap and then we can finish decorating."

Fingers in her mouth, Isabel nodded and hurried off to find the nursemaid. Alexander flicked a finger under the baby's chin before drawing Emma against him once more. "When he is settled, shall we, uh, head out for a walk?"

"Aren't you exhausted?"

He shook his head and sealed his mouth across hers. Emma sank into him and clung to her husband with her free hand. His lips had warmed and she drew in the scent and feel of him.

“Never too exhausted for you,” he said.

“Let us have lunch first. Then we can take a walk. Just the two of us.”

Alexander sighed and slipped a hand down to grab her rear through her skirts. “Always making me wait.”

She leaned up to press a firm kiss to his lips. “You waited almost a year. I’m sure you can wait a few more hours.”

“Well, my love, you were worth waiting for.”

Emma gazed into her husband’s eyes and cupped his jaw. “As were you. Merry Christmas, husband.”

“Merry Christmas, wife.”

When he bent to kiss her firmly and Frederick squealed between them, Emma uttered up a prayer of thanks for her husband’s determination to create a proper marriage for them and for her own courage. She looked forward to many more Christmases with her wonderful family and many more Christmas seductions too, she hoped.

Afterword

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How to Kiss a Rogue

Connected by a Kiss, book 2

USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR AMANDA
MARIEL

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Published by Amanda Mariel

Cover art by Jaycee DeLorenzo (Sweet n Spicy Designs)

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*This one is for all of us who believe in the magic of the season and for the
rogue's who inspire us.*

First and foremost I want to thank my good friend USA Today Bestselling Author Christina McKnight for approaching me with the idea of using her character Lady Natalie from *A Kiss At Christmastide* to write a companion book. It has been great fun to work with you Christina! Thank you to my editor and beta readers for helping to shape and polish Natalie's story. My family deserves a big thank you too. Your support and enthusiasm mean the world. Last but not least, a huge thank you to my readers for continuing to cheer me on and read my books. I adore you all!

Prologue

Lady Natalie Seymour, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Sheridan, stood on the raised platform at the front of her family's music room on the final night of her come out celebration, staring daggers at her former best friend, Lady Pippa Godfrey. If looks could kill, the traitor would surely expire for Natalie was beyond livid—she was broken, heartsick, and infuriated. Pippa had betrayed her and she would pay a penance for what she'd done.

Natalie forced a bright smile before introducing the next girl to take the stage. Her gaze landed again on her former best friend. Pippa fidgeted in the front row of the crowded room looking much like a mouse in a trap. She clearly knew what she had done and what was to come. Pippa's discomfort caused a genuine smile to overtake Natalie's contrived one. She deserved to suffer after what she'd done the previous evening at Natalie's come out ball. She deserved far worse than discomfort, Pippa deserved to be hurt like she'd hurt Natalie.

The previous night had been magical until Pippa destroyed everything—her future, her hopes, and her dreams. All vanquished in a matter of moments. The ballroom sparkled under the light of hundreds of candles as they celebrated. Potted ferns and floral arrangements decorated the space while elegant ladies and gentlemen mingled and danced. All in attendance to welcome her into the loving arms of society. Natalie had been excited to share her special night with her long time friend. She'd welcomed and embraced Pippa, but no more. She would never look at Pippa with kindness again.

Both ladies had been dressed in white gowns befitting debutantes with their hair fashionably styled and glittering bobbles hanging from their necks and ears when they entered the ball. Natalie had been proud to have Pippa by her side as they danced, flirted, and laughed the evening away. That is, until Pippa betrayed her—washing away the magic of her night.

The memory pained her, piercing her heart as she tried to focus on

today's recital. All the same, she could not stop from dwelling on what had occurred. Natalie pulled in a deep breath and searched the music room for the Marquis of Knightly. He and her brother, Bradford, were longtime friends and as such, Natalie had known the Marquis for most of her life. She had loved him for as long as she could remember. The man was never thought of as Bradford's friend but Natalie's future everything. A fact Pippa well knew—a topic they'd labored over many nights as they laughed and planned their future marriages. Her heart hitched when she found Christian, Lord Knightly, seated in the second row a few chairs down from Pippa—his eyes trained on the traitor's dark chestnut locks.

Her blood heated as her pulse quickened. She could no more fight the vision that assaulted her than one could stop a summer storm. Pippa moving to the terrace with Lord Knightly following behind her. Pippa in his arms under the starlit sky. Natalie closed her eyes, fighting to steady herself. She'd been unable to watch their tryst, her heart instantly broken. Natalie had spent the remainder of what should have been the best night of her life attempting to understand why Pippa would hurt her in such a way.

The ball had continued well into the early morning hours after which Pippa had stayed in her room. Perhaps Natalie should have confronted the traitor once they retired to her chamber, but she'd not known what to say. Instead, she'd done her best to act as though nothing was wrong, all the while, her mind replaying the scene until at last sleep had claimed her.

Applause filled the air in the music room as the current performer sang her final off-key note, pulling Natalie back to the present. The time had come for her to introduce Pippa. She stood and smoothed her skirts before moving to the dais.

God give her strength. The last thing she wished to do was introduce the tart as though they were still friends. Sadly, she had no choice. Her parents were unaware of what had transpired the night before—and they knew even less about her planned eternity with Christian. Natalie hid her emotions, summoning the skills she had been taught since birth, poise and grace above all else. The *ton* would never witness what her cool exterior shielded from view. She'd not allow anyone to see her devastation—least of all Pippa.

Natalie sought Pippa out, amused and slightly delighted to see the girl gripping her skirt with white knuckles as her mother spoke to her. Something was clearly afoot, but Natalie doubted it concerned Pippa's actions with Lord Knightly. Did she feel the slightest bit of remorse over extinguishing every dream Natalie had ever had?

It mattered not. Natalie tipped her chin a fraction as Pippa stood from her chair. "Next to grace the stage is Lady Pippa Godfrey."

Natalie gestured in Pippa's direction as an idea burst into her mind. She gave a coy smile. "Lady Pippa and I have been bosom friends since before we were allowed to touch a pianoforte, but since meeting, we've shared everything, including our music tutor, Mr. Giles, though I dare to say that Pippa is far closer to the man than my parents would ever allow."

Natalie met Pippa's gaze as the girls cheeks flamed red. Her words had hit their mark and Pippa would surely be ruined as a result. It was, however, a pity that social exile would have no effect on her trysting with Lord Knightly. The rakehell may even find her more suited to him now. A moment of regret stabbed her. She lost as much as she won in this situation.

She could not undo what she'd done—nor did she seek to. There was no doubt the entire room heard her announcement and understood the implication of her words. Light female laughter and deep manly chuckles filled the room, floating from the far back of the crowded space to the very front, where Natalie stood on the platform. Her announcement would spread through society faster than a wild fire. Every drawing room door would be closed to Pippa by morning.

Natalie stood with her shoulders squared and a smirk on her lips, determined to follow her hasty course—she would see Pippa suffer. Would Pippa run from the room or would she accept her challenge? Natalie peered at her, waiting for the answer. Satisfaction at getting her revenge warred with heartache from Pippa's betrayal.

Beside her, Pippa's mother fanned herself as the pair exchanged more words. Natalie's pulse raced as she watched them. After what seemed several minutes, Pippa stood, her posture as stiff as Natalie's. How could Pippa hold her head high and approach after what Natalie had said? Did the lady have no shame?

Natalie peered at Pippa as she took the stage. This was not over. She would see Pippa suffer as she did, and she would have St. Vella for herself despite Pippa's interference.

Chapter 1

Natalie sat primly on the chase, her lap covered in various shades of colored paper and different types of lace as she made flowers for the many sprays of evergreen that would soon deck the rooms of her family estate. She glanced at the chair across from her where her cousin, Lady Daphne, sat attaching the paper flowers to sprays. Natalie shivered at Daphne's loud breathing. Pippa had the same way about her when she was deep in concentration. Why couldn't she keep the traitor off her mind?

Last Christmastide, Pippa had been by her side as they created flowers and dolls for both their homes. A stab of regret pricked her heart. She would never understand why Pippa trespassed on their friendship. Even now, months after her come out, the betrayal still hurt. What scarred her most was Pippa's devil-may-care defiance when Natalie had taken her revenge. The backstabber had taken the stage with her head high as though she'd done nothing wrong. How had she never seen Pippa's coldhearted ways before?

Natalie passed another paper bud to Daphne. "In two days time the house will be bursting with guests." Including Pippa, if their parents had their way—which they likely would.

Natalie refused to apologize to Pippa after ruining her at the recital in the same way she refused to explain her actions to her parents. She saw no need to bare her soul and pain to anyone. As a result, her parents remained determined to see her and Pippa reunited.

That would *never* happen. In fact, if the traitor did show herself at the party—Natalie would make her regret it. She did not know what she would do or how she would stomach being under the same roof as her former friend. *Pray, do not let her attend.*

"I must admit, I was taken by surprise when Mama told me we were to travel here for another celebration in your honor." Daphne did not look up from her task as she worked to attach a pink bud to the branches of evergreen on the table.

Confusion spiraled through Natalie. Her honor? To what did her cousin refer? Natalie's parents hosted a Christmas celebration every year—though not quite to the scale of this year's party. Three days with everyone who was anyone in the *ton* having been invited. Many left their own families to attend one of mother's grand events and this holiday house party would be no different. Her mother had gone so far as to commission several new gowns for her. Perhaps something was afoot, but what?

Natalie set her crafts aside and dusted her skirt before leveling her stare on Daphne. "You certainly are aware of more than you are letting on, *dear* cousin. Do explain what is going on here."

Daphne glanced sheepishly up at her. "I am not certain, other than that Mama told me the party was for you." She fidgeted with the edges of the flower. "And that there is to be a grand announcement."

Natalie's stomach rolled at Daphne's final words. *Grand announcement*. This could not bode well. She leaned forward, taking Daphne's hand from the flower she'd been fidgeting with. "This is important. What else do you know?"

"Have the Duke and Duchess not discussed the purpose of the party with you?" Daphne asked, eyes round.

"You know more than you are saying, Daphne. I can see it in your eyes. Do tell me," Natalie demanded. Whatever was afoot had to be big, and since her parents had said nothing to her, she could only assume she would not like whatever it was.

Daphne averted her gaze, mumbling, "There was mention of a betrothal."

Natalie's breath caught, as nausea threatened her. She could not get betrothed. There was only one man for her, Christian St. Vella, the Marquis of Knightly. There was no possibility he would agree to a betrothal—yet. She jerked Daphne's hand. "Are you quite certain?"

"I...well...I overheard Mama and the Duchess speaking on the topic shortly after we arrived in Somerset last night."

Natalie released her hold on Daphne, rose to her feet, and started for the door of the drawing room. She did not know what was going on, but she was determined to find out at once.

And put an end to the madness.

"Do not be so hasty. You'll make a cake of yourself," Daphne called after her as she sped from the room.

Natalie did not care if the whole household and all of their early guests witnessed her unladylike behavior. She hiked her skirt and ran down the long hallway leading to Father's office.

"Cease this instant!" Mother stepped in front of her as she approached the staircase. "You are a lady, not some...some street urchin. Good heavens, Natalie, remember yourself. We have important

guests under this roof.”

“Yes, Mother.” Natalie attempted to step around her but her family’s matriarch repositioned herself, blocking the path once more.

“Your Father and I would have a word with you.” Mother leveraged a severe stare at her.

Natalie met her gaze with a sternness all her own. “Perfect, as I would like a word with the two of you as well.”

“Then waste no more time. Come along.”

She gave a slight nod before walking with painfully slow, ladylike steps beside her Mother, neither speaking another word. Everything inside her screamed that Daphne had heard correctly. Mother’s silence added to her trepidation as they drew nearer to Father’s office. What was she to do if they had indeed settled on a match for her? Did she dare hope they’d chosen the same man she had?

The very idea of a betrothal was absurd. She’d only recently come out and no one had shown any interest in courting her beyond a ride in Hyde Park. But then, her parents were not a love match—did not believe in love matches. She had been trained her entire life to be the perfect wife to some lord who would be advantageous to her family. Still, she’d never accepted the fate—always held out hope that she could find love. With Christian. Could she let her girlhood fantasy go? Would she be capable of finding happiness in a marriage that was not between her and the man she loved?

Natalie had always imagined her future husband’s world would revolve around her. She would be his everything. How could a stranger fit that mold?

Mother traipsed into Father’s office, sitting in her favored wingback chair near the desk. Natalie followed, taking the matching chair before her Father. She notched her chin when she met Father’s gaze. Whatever he had to say, she would take it with her normal mask of grace and indifference. Her parents would accept nothing less. If what he conveyed did not have to do with the party, she would ask him about the *grand announcement* outright.

Natalie forced a small smile. “For what cause have I been summoned?”

“Do you know I caught her running down the hallway like a small child?” Mother glanced at Natalie. “No, of course you do not know, because you were not there. All the same, this news could not come at a better time. Our daughter needs a husband to guide her.”

How convenient that Mother caught her acting a hoyden, running across the house...almost like this was all staged...like she had forced them to choose a match with her unladylike behavior. Natalie snapped her attention to her Mother, doing her best not to let her tumultuous emotions show. “A husband?”

Father cleared his throat. "Yes, I have secured a match for you. At this very moment, the Earl of Maddox, Lucas Hartfeld, heir to the Marquis of Bowmont, is on his way to sign the betrothal contract. In fact, I expected him earlier today."

This could not be happening to her. First her supposed best friend betrayed her, taking the only man she had ever loved, and now her parents wanted her to wed a man she'd never met. What had she done that was so horrible to deserve such a fate? Her heart beat madly as she closed her eyes in an attempt to restrain her rising emotions. Anger, annoyance, fear, and uncertainty all fought to control her. But she could not allow that, she would not give them the upper hand by knowing the prospect of wedding the earl could crush her.

"It is a very profitable match. Our family will benefit and you, my dear, will become a marchioness some day." Mother grinned.

"Do I have no say on the matter?" Natalie's voice shook slightly and she pressed her lips together to stop her wayward emotions from betraying her.

Father folded his hands on the desk and leaned slightly forward. "Of course not. As our daughter it is our duty to see you wed. Your duty is to be obedient and follow our wishes."

"And what if I love another?" Natalie stared into the depths of her Father's gaze, hoping to see a glimmer of hope. They were completely void.

Mother reached for her hand, taking it in her own. Natalie felt no warmth through their gloves, but then she had never felt warmth from her parents. Not that they had ever been unkind to her. They did care for her and her brother—giving them all they needed to thrive in London society. They simply were not the warm sort.

Natalie looked to her Mother. "Might I have a bit of time to seek my own match before you choose for me?"

"Have you someone in mind?" Mother asked.

"The Marquis of Knightly." Natalie could not fight the smile that overtook her simply by speaking his name.

"Are you mad?" Father snapped. "That man is a reprobate, a rakehell. His name will never be linked to mine. He's a disgrace—a no good scoundrel. Your brother's reputation has already been tainted by their association. I'll not have the same happen to me."

Natalie's heart sank to her toes at Father's sharp rebuke. What objection did he have to Christian? He and her brother, Bradford, had been close friends since they were in knee pants. Christian had been to their estate many times and her parents always seemed to welcome him. He was wealthy and titled. There was his less than desirable reputation, but many lords were rakehells before they wed.

She drew in a deep breath. "I am quite sound of mind. Lord

Knightly is a good catch. Titled and wealthy. He will be a duke someday—as you are, Father. What’s more...I love him.”

Mother inhaled sharply as Father stood. He paced to the window on the far end of the room, then back to stand in front of Natalie. She tipped her head up to meet his eyes. “Father.”

“Has he compromised you?”

“Heavens, no.” Natalie stood out of reaction. “He has never so much as looked at me with desire.”

“What do you know of desire?” Mother flipped open her fan and began waving it quickly.

“Sit down,” Father ordered, before moving back to regain his own chair behind his large, mahogany desk.

Natalie did as ordered though every piece of her wanted to run from the room, from the estate, and never return. She was tired of being the obedient duke’s daughter. A diamond of the first water, according to most of the *ton*, and kept on the ducal shelf like one of Mother’s priceless tiaras. Paraded by the duke and duchess and ordered around as it suited the dukedom.

“If Lord Knightly has not compromised you then there is no reason not to sign the betrothal. You will present and conduct yourself appropriately. You will marry Lord Maddox. Is that clear?”

She wanted to refuse, to insist she be allowed to choose her future, but it was utterly useless. “Yes, Father.”

He nodded. “Very well. You are excused.”

Natalie took her leave without a backward glance. Her parents could force the marriage, but they could never force her heart—or demand she forget Christian. She would know passion before she bound herself in holy matrimony to Lord Maddox—a man she had never even had the occasion to lay eyes on.

Chapter 2

“Why ever did I allow you to talk me into this escapade?”

Christian St. Vella exited his carriage followed by Bradford Seymour, Lord Greenwich, and Grayson Abbot, the Duke of Kissinger. The three had travelled together from London to Greenwich's family estate for the grand Christmastide party his parents were throwing in honor of his sister, Lady Natalie.

Greenwich clapped Christian on the shoulder. “Come now, chap. It is not as if you had anything else to occupy you during the holiday.”

Christian could not argue the point. If he had not accompanied Greenwich, he would be back in London tangled up with some ladybird or another. He hadn't graced the ducal estate with his presence in years. Not since Mother passed away, leaving him alone with his cold, bastard of a father. A chill assaulted him at the memory. The moment her casket had been lowered into the ground at his family's gravesite on the ridge behind Stedford Hall, Christian had left the only place that felt like home and never looked back.

“This could be good sport,” the Duke of Kissinger added. “There are sure to be lonely widows in residence.”

“And far too many debutantes along with their husband-hunting mama's.” Christian grimaced.

Greenwich motioned for the other men to follow him. “This is a respectable gathering honoring my baby sister. Do try to behave like the gentlemen you are purported to be.” He glanced at his friends, a playful glint in his eyes. “It took much convincing to secure you both an invitation.”

Christian chuckled as he walked toward the grand home followed by Kissinger. “What rag has reported such absurd lies about us?”

“And more importantly,” Kissinger continued. “How did your parents learn the truth of the matter?”

Christian grinned, recalling their escapades. Greenwich and Kissinger befriended him in their youth. The friendship had seen

Christian through the tumultuous years of his life when he'd been fully under his father's control. Through the years, the men had only grown closer—solidifying their bond. They spent many hours together at gaming hells, gentlemen's clubs, brothels, and their own homes.

The trio made their way across the drive and into the house. Christian had spent many days and nights under the roof of Harington Gardens, Greenwich's family estate. He'd most recently been in residence for Lady Natalie's introduction to society. A tedious affair that saw the house fairly bursting with debutantes. He'd been exceedingly pleased to make it back to London without becoming leg-shackled to some young miss and his pockets heavy with newly won coin.

"How does Lady Natalie fair?" Christian glanced at Greenwich. There had been some ugly business between her and her longtime friend, Lady Pippa Godfrey, at a recital held during her come out. Thankfully, he'd been ensconced in Greenwich's study, the two of them sampling the newly arrived port during the debacle.

"I have not been home since Natalie's party so I fear what we may be walking into," Greenwich answered. "I can tell you, she has not been informed about the reason for this party."

"What are the two of you going on about?" Kissinger asked, handing his coat to the butler.

Odd that the duke and duchess had not told Natalie the celebration was in her honor. Perhaps the gossips had the right of things. "I could use a brandy." Christian handed over his own coat.

"A splendid idea. We will fill you in over a drink or ten." Greenwich started down a long hallway.

Christian had always thought Lady Natalie and Lady Pippa made an odd pairing. The women were opposite in nature. Lady Natalie had always been a vivacious, spoiled pain. She was loud and demanding, and always had a way of inserting herself into his and Greenwich's plans when they were children.

Lady Pippa on the other hand had a quiet, sweet nature. She followed Lady Natalie's lead most of the time but was somehow less of an annoyance.

"Is the story worth my time?" Kissinger smoothed his cravat as the group strode into the smoking room.

There wasn't much of a story to tell unless Greenwich knew more about his sister's actions than Christian did. More than once since that night, he'd pondered Lady Natalie's actions, wondering to his own detriment why she did it. Honestly, he did not care whether or not the pair were friends, but he owed her an old debt and thought this may be a way to repay her.

Some years ago, Natalie had shoved him out of the path of a

runaway carriage. True she had thoroughly embarrassed him in the process, but had she not come to his aide, he'd surly be in the ground with hoof prints marring his backside.

Greenwich went to the sideboard and poured two fingers of brandy into a tumbler. "Not bloody likely."

Christian retrieved the decanter and two more tumblers before moving to a high back chair. He handed Kissinger one of the glasses, then filled his own to the top with the amber liquor. "Something happened between Lady Natalie and Lady Pippa. Whatever it was had Lady Natalie after Lady Pippa's blood."

He took a long sip, enjoying the burn of the brandy as it slid down his throat. "Lady Natalie announced that Lady Pippa had scandalous designs on their music tutor. She implied that Lady Pippa had a ruinous relationship with the man, Mr. Giles. That is all I know of the subject as Greenwich and I were suitably entertained elsewhere during the episode."

"And what came of Lady Natalie's announcement?" Kissinger prodded. "Might I have a chance at getting under her skirts?"

"Nothing at all." Greenwich tossed back his drink. "Leastwise not that I have been made privy too. Seems her reputation is solid."

"You will have to chase a more suitable skirt, Kissinger." Christian swirled the brandy in his tumbler.

"All skirts suit me." Kissinger winked.

"Why she did it is a deuced mystery." Christian savored another drink of his brandy. He was most curious to know what prompted Lady Natalie's announcement. She and Lady Pippa were always very close. Seemed a bit odd for Lady Natalie to turn on her in such a drastic fashion. Did it not?

Greenwich raised one blond brow. "Have you met my sister?"

"Indeed." Kissinger chuckled. "Very true. Lady Natalie has always been a spitfire."

Christian stretched his legs out, reclining in the chair. "Do you recall the time we refused to allow her to accompany us to Bond Street? She had designs on a new bonnet and was spitting mad that we would not take her to purchase it."

"She turned our horses loose and ordered the carriage wheels removed." Kissinger smirked, shaking his head.

Greenwich leaned forward. "Then she hid her coy smile behind her fan when we confronted her. And worse still, Mother forced us to take her for the blasted bonnet."

Christian could still picture the self-satisfied expression on Lady Natalie's face when he and his friends returned to the house after discovering their horses missing. He'd not seen an inkling of apology in her eyes.

"I will remember that for as long as I live. I swear I've never seen the likes of it from any other lady." Kissinger refilled his tumbler. "If I were to fall into the parson's trap, it would never be with the likes of your sister, Greenwich—now, Lady Pippa is a different story."

Christian could not help but agree with Kissinger, though he'd never voice his opinion and disrespect Greenwich's sister in such a way. He finished his drink in one long sip. "God help the unfortunate man who ends up shackled to her." If the *ton* gossip had the right of things they would all be finding out exactly who the poor sap was, and soon. "Do you suspect the gossip is true, Greenwich?"

"I do. Father hinted at wanting to secure a match when I was last here." He lifted the now empty decanter and started toward the sideboard before turning back to his friends. "If you will excuse me, I should announce our arrival to the Duke."

"Very well, but be a gentleman and fetch us a fresh decanter before you take your leave." Christian waved toward the sideboard.

Kissinger stood. "I fear you will be drinking alone, Knightly. I have no wish to be foxed before dinner."

"I have never known such a thing to bother you before." Christian took the decanter Greenwich offered and poured two fingers of the liquor into his tumbler.

"We will drink our share soon enough. For now, I wish to wash the travel dust off and possibly spot a lonely widow or two." Kissinger gave a nod, then took his leave, following Greenwich from the room.

He would love to be in the room when Natalie was told of her betrothal. Perhaps her parents had already informed her—if not, they would soon. How would the hellion take the news? Knowing Natalie as he did, he'd wager she would fight it and he'd think nothing less of her for it. She was like a summer storm blazing a path across the land. It had always been that way with her.

He tipped his glass, relishing the last of the brandy, then went to the sideboard and sat the empty tumbler on a silver tray before turning to leave. He should not give another second's thought to Lady Natalie and her actions friendship, or lack thereof, with Lady Pippa. They were none of his concern.

Still, he had known her and Lady Pippa for most of his life. Greenwich and Kissinger were like family to him, and by virtue, Lady Natalie as well. Could he and his friends just as easily be as close as brothers one moment and enemies the next? He shuddered at the thought as he started up the stairway leading to his guest chamber.

If not for his friends, he would have a lonely, boring existence. Lord knew his father was a cold bastard and he had no siblings. He shook his head, chasing the ponderings away. There was no need to ruminate on such serious matters when there were skirts to chase and

fine liquors to drink.

Chapter 3

“P erhaps you will find the earl to your liking,” Daphne said.

Natalie dropped the drape, allowing it to billow back into place over her drawing room window. “I am convinced it shall not be so.” How the girl was ever so optimistic every moment of every day, irritated Natalie—it was as if the woman didn’t realize her first season had come and gone without so much as a single interested suitor.

Besides, the message from the duke and duchess were clear. Father’s words whispered to her from the depths of her mind. She was to wed a stranger for the betterment of her family. The duty belonged to her and she would see it through even if the act broke her heart—which she had no doubt it would.

“All the same, I will do as my parents have bid me to do.” What other option was there? She certainly did not relish inciting her father’s anger or her mother’s disdain.

Daphne sat her needle point aside and folded her hands in her lap. “I would not mind over much if Mama and Papa choose my husband. Doing so would save me from having to attend yet another season of social events. I do so despise sitting with the other wallflowers.” Daphne averted her gaze. “I will never be the English rose you are.”

She wanted to deny her dear cousin’s assessment of her own status among last season’s crop of debutantes, but with a figure a little too round and a shyness even more glaring, not another term suited.

“I am quite certain your parents would not select a stranger, as mine have.” Her tone was icy and Daphne stiffened at her harsh words. “As for being a wallflower, its nonsense, you simply have to move about the room so gentlemen have the opportunity to notice you. Remove yourself from the wall and learn how to bat your lashes. You may even enjoy yourself.”

Daphne’s cheeks bloomed crimson. “No, I do not believe they would select an unknown gentleman for me.” She glanced down at her lap, avoiding the topic of her wallflower status entirely. “I am sorry.”

Natalie closed her eyes in desperate need of a moment's escape. Who was Lucas Hartfeld, Earl of Maddox? He could not move in her circles, as she'd never heard of him. Would he take her away from her friends and family once they were wed? Remove her to some faraway corner of England? She shuddered at the realization that as his wife, he'd have the right to take her wherever he pleased. She would have no alternative but to go obediently. Could she tame her rebellious streak and be a dutiful wife?

A far more important question loomed. Would she experience passion at his hands?

Natalie looked to Daphne. "Tell me, have you any knowledge of the Earl of Maddox?"

"I fear not," Daphne replied.

Natalie strolled to the fireplace, hungry for the warmth it afforded. She held her hands up, palms facing the flames. Would their home be comfortable like Harington Gardens and her family's London townhouse or would she be relegated to roaming about cold, drafty rooms?

"How could they expect me to wed a man I have not met? A man we know nothing about?" Her gaze remained trained on the flickering orange flames—lost in the nightmare of what could become her future. "He could be a complete scoundrel. An abuser of women, or heaven forbid, one step away from debtor's prison."

Daphne came to stand beside Natalie, placing a hand on her arm. "Surely your father knows the earl. I do not believe he would betroth you to a man he did not trust to care for you—or at the least have considered what you are to gain in the match."

"Do you not mean what he and Mother are to gain?" Natalie failed to keep the scorn from her words.

"He is a business man, after all," Daphne sighed. It was the most accurate statement ever to pass the girl's lips.

She would make herself mad if she continued to ponder a future she had no control over. Exhaling a slow breath, she pulled her hands back from the fire's warmth and turned to Daphne. "I pray you are correct and I do not wish to speak—"

The door smacked against the wall, rattling a portrait hanging nearby. Lord Knightly, followed by her brother and the Duke of Kissinger, strolled into the room. Her heart skipped a beat, her words catching in her throat. She'd been told that Bradford arrived home this afternoon but no one made mention of his friends. Of course she had expected Lord Knightly to attend the Christmastide festivities, but she'd not thought he would arrive before the other guests were due in two days time.

"Ladies." The Duke of Kissinger offered a bow. Lord Knightly and

Bradford echoed his sentiment.

"I had heard you were home, Bradford, but was not told you brought your friends along," Natalie forced the words past the tightness in her throat. "It is always a pleasure, Your Grace." She nodded to the Duke of Kissinger before turning to Christian. "Lord Knightly."

Daphne greeted the gentlemen as well before moving to a high back chair, clearly discomforted by their male counterparts.

Bradford approached and dropped a kiss on Natalie's cheek. "How do you fair?"

The glint in his eye told her he'd been to see Father and was aware of her impending betrothal. She notched her chin a fraction. "Very well, thank you." She would no more show her emotions to her brother than she would the *ton*.

She had already revealed too much to Daphne. Natalie glanced at her sitting with her head tipped down, plucking imaginary lint from her skirt. At the least, she could trust her cousin would not betray her confidence. And she had not allowed Daphne full access either. "Do let us sit."

"After you." Bradford swept out one arm, indicating the cluster of furniture situated around the fireplace.

"Always the gentlemen." Natalie gave a knowing smirk before lowering herself onto a chair.

Christian chuckled, tossing a look at Bradford. Natalie could not take her eyes from him—she drank in every detail as he strolled across the room and seated himself, stretching his long legs out in front of him. He appeared more muscular than he had the last time she'd seen him and his skin fairly glowed bronze. She doubted Lord Maddox could compare to him on any level. Christian was male perfection from his black hair and blue eyes to his wide shoulders and muscular thighs. For all she knew, Lord Maddox was a portly man with dull eyes and a repulsive demeanor. The type of man she could never be attracted to, let alone love.

One thing was certain, Natalie would know passion before she tied herself to the earl. She would have Christian's arms around her, his lips pressed to hers. "Would you all care to play a game while we await the evening meal?" She glanced at the others, smiling.

"Blind Man's Bluff, perhaps." Daphne refolded her hands on her lap.

Bradford smirked, turning his attention to Natalie. "Mother forbid us from playing that in the house after Natalie broke her favorite vase stumbling around in a blindfold."

"I do not stumble." She glared at him, risking a quick glance in Christian's direction to gauge his reaction to Bradford's claim of

clumsiness.

"You did...right into that table." Bradford pointed across the room at a mahogany three-legged table near a floor-to-ceiling window.

Natalie squared her shoulders. "You are mistaken." She smiled her sweetest smile. "All the same, Blind Man's Bluff will not suite. How about Doctor?"

"A splendid choice." His Grace, the Duke of Kissinger, leaned back against the chaise. "So long as you or Lady Daphne play the role of doctor."

"Very well, now everyone act inflicted with some horrendous malady or another." Natalie stood and smoothed her skirts.

Daphne placed one, glove-covered hand over her forehead, tipping her head back while Bradford slouched against the arm of his chair. Christian mimicked the duke, stretching out across a chaise. Natalie gave herself a moment to assess each of them before beginning the game. If she could cause Christian to earn a forfeit, she'd get her kiss.

Natalie strolled to her cousin's side, then took Daphne's wrist, feeling her pulse. "Lady Daphne, what are your symptoms?"

"My head is throbbing something fierce." The girl's wrist was clammy, as if an illness had truly taken hold of her.

"Worry not, all will be well." She held her chin between her thumb and pointer finger, pondering. The trick to securing a forfeit from Christian would be in giving detailed cures, making them harder to recall later. "You simply must have the soles of your feet tickled with a peacock's feather each night before bed."

Daphne giggled. "Thank you ever so much, Doctor."

Natalie gave a studious nod before turning to her next patient. She would bide her time, placing Christian between Bradford and the duke. Surely if she moved slowly, her odds of stumping him would improve.

She took Bradford's wrist, feeling for his pulse. "I fear you may be deceased, dear Brother, for I cannot feel anything."

He jerked his arm free. "Do get on with it."

"Oh, as you wish. What seems to be your affliction?"

"My stomach has soured," he said, his tone flat.

She arched a brow, not at all impressed with his sudden attitude. "You will require a tonic to cure your malady. A pint of decoction of Sweet-William, with three table spoons of refined sugar, every four hours will cure you."

"Indeed." Bradford shook his head before settling it back on the arm of the chair.

"Lord Knightly, if I may." She reached for his arm, taking her time to locate his pulse. The steady rhythm beat beneath her fingers, causing her own pulse to quicken. Without releasing him, she asked,

“What ails you, My Lord?”

“I am burning hot with fever.” Christian gave a gentle tug, freeing his wrist from her grasp.

Her fan would be most welcome as she had warmed considerably, too. Her face fairly burned as she considered her prescription. This one need not be as complex as the others since she’d not be asking him about his own cure. “A bowl of ice will do the trick. Two cubes at night followed by one in the morning will see you sound once more.”

“Much obliged, Doctor.” One corner of his mouth pulled up in a half-grin before she turned to the duke.

“Your Grace, you look wretched. Do allow me to take your pulse.”

The Duke of Kissinger rolled his head to one side. “I am so fatigued I can hardly stand to keep my eyes open, Doctor.”

“There is an easy fix for such an ailment. You require nine and thirty hours of sleep, Your Grace.” She laughed at the absurdity of her order before stepping back to view all of the patients.

The time had come to question them and discover what they remembered about her treatment plans. Daphne was certain to recall every detail. She’d always had a sharp memory. Perhaps from all the hours she spent on the fringes of activity, observing. Natalie came to stand before Daphne, her mind made up. “Lord Knightly is ill with fever. What would you order in that case?”

“A bowl of ice is in order. Two cubes at night followed by one in the morning.” Daphne smiled confidently.

“You are correct, as I knew you would be.” Natalie directed her attention to Bradford. “Let us see if my brother’s memory is as refined as yours. Lady Daphne is suffering a headache. What would you order for her?”

“She requires the soles of her feet to be tickled with a feather each night at bed time.”

Natalie raised one brow. “What type of feather is needed?”

“Pheasant...no, ostrich,” Bradford said, lifting his head off the arm of the chair.

“Ha! You owe me a forfeit. I ordered it be done with a peacock’s feather.”

Bradford sat up straight, then looked at Daphne. “Does she tell the truth?”

Natalie released an exasperated breath. “Of course I am telling the truth. Do not be a spoil sport.”

“Daphne?” Bradford prodded.

She released her lower lip from between her teeth and glanced between Natalie and Bradford. “She tells the truth.”

“Very well, I concede.”

Now she had only the duke and Christian left to ask. She studied

both men for a moment as she attempted to determine the best order with which to proceed. If she were to ask the duke first, there would be but one order left for Christian to remember. Asking him first left the possibility that even if he recalled the doctor's prescribed cure, he may not match it to the proper ailment.

"Lord Knightly, my brother complained of a soured stomach. What would you order?"

Natalie folded her hands in front of her belly and prayed he would get the answer wrong.

Christian lifted his head, placing his arm behind it. "Lady Natalie, I would call for a tonic made from a pint of decoction of Sweet-William, with three table spoons of refined sugar, every six hours."

Her heart jumped at his mistake, she would have her kiss. After pushing back her overzealous reaction, Natalie smiled coyly. "And you would only make his stomach worse by dosing him wrong. You owe me a forfeit, my lord."

"Well played. What do you wish for me to do?"

Natalie struggled to keep a grin from her lips—lips that would find themselves pressed to Christian's before the day was done.

Chapter 4

Christian waited for Natalie's reply, not at all sure what the hoyden would require from him. The glint in her eyes told him he should be wary. How had he never noted the beauty of her eyes before? They were a mesmerizing shade of blue, more like turquoise. The kind of eyes a man could drown in. He'd looked at her a lot over the years but had never seen her—not as he did now. He blinked, breaking the connection, reminding himself that she was not for him. Still, he could not stop from studying her.

"I am not yet ready to collect, my lord." Natalie gave a mischievous grin, then traipsed over to where Kissinger lounged against a red brocade chaise.

Christian heard her question the duke—even heard Kissinger answer—but he knew not what they said. It was as if he were seeing Natalie for the first time. When had she blossomed into a woman? He followed the curve of her waist, trailing over the flare of her hips before directing his gaze back to her angelic face. Too bad the woman beneath all the beauty was a complete hellion and entirely off limits.

Greenwich would have his hide if he ruined Natalie and he'd have to be mad to wed her. She would make a deplorable wife, needy and demanding. His days spent in leisurely pursuits would be ended at her hands—clubs, gambling, women—he could still attend, but she'd likely demand to accompany him. His clubs would turn them away, she'd win at cards, and his lady companions may well prefer her company to his. He'd be completely miserable with such a wife. Hell, any wife would make him miserable.

"You gentleman are truly wretched at this game." She laughed.

Her merriment filled the room, and him, but quickly soured when he realized she laughed at him.

Natalie's declaration pulled him from his musings. He stood and strolled to the window, peering out at the darkening sky, very much in need of a distraction. A strong drink would do him well. Pity he

hadn't imbibed more before entering the parlor.

"If not for Daphne, I would never believe that each of us got the wrong answer." Bradford rubbed his jaw. "Do collect your forfeits so we can get on with it."

Christian turned back to the assembly, his gaze colliding with Natalie's, sending a shiver through him. He could only imagine the tortures she had in mind for them. The last time he owed her a forfeit, she made him sort her ribbons. Before that, he had to attend her dance lesson. Once, she made him and Greenwich take her fishing. They should have been leery when she asked them to play, should have refused.

She turned her attention to Kissinger. "There is to be a ball the first night of the party. I wish for you to dance with Lady Daphne."

Christian could not fight his amused grin. The duke would not be pleased with having to dance, certainly not with an unwed miss. When they had agreed to attend with Greenwich, the three of them had determined they would spend their time in the gaming room, attending the ball only long enough to witness the grand announcement so as not to overly anger their hosts.

"That is not necessary." Daphne flushed a bright pink.

Kissinger sat up from his relaxed position and smiled. "I am honored to dance with the lady."

He lied well, Christian would give him that. The only thing Kissinger would be honored to do was lift her skirts. All the same, it was chivalrous of him to forgo embarrassing the lady and accept his forfeit. With luck, Natalie would ask something as mundane from him.

Natalie nodded toward Greenwich. "You will attend Lady Daphne and myself for a game of my choosing. Of course, His Grace and Lord Knightly are welcome to join us." She looked between him and Kissinger. "Do say you will come?"

"You may count on it," Kissinger answered for them both.

Christian nodded his agreement, feeling much like a mouse in cat's claws. The last thing he desired was to spend the afternoon in the company of ladies when there was good liquor to be had. But what choice did he have? He could not very well refuse after the others agreed; it would be seen as a slight. Christian would not disrespect a member of Greenwich's family, no matter that it was his wayward sister.

There would be no harm in spending time with Natalie at any rate. Over the years, they had been in each other's company many times. She would be her annoying self and in the end and he would be exceedingly pleased to depart from her company and very much in want of a drink as he was now. Besides, one could only drink so much, and this party was to last several days. He was sure to need some sort

of distraction from his boredom.

He inhaled a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he waited for his order. She looked at him for a moment, then at the floor. He'd had enough of her games for one day. "And what do you require of me?"

She met his eyes, a coy smile tugging at her full, pink lips. "I am not quite sure as of yet. Let us depart so we can ready ourselves for the evening meal and I will call in your forfeit once I have settled on something fitting."

"I fear you are in trouble, Knightly." Greenwich smirked.

Christian clenched his jaw in irritation. "Indeed." They should never have allowed her to get away with demanding such outrageous forfeits. It was unheard of, with the exception of Lady Natalie. Everyone else asked for things like kisses or required you to cluck like a chicken. Fast things done before the gathering dispersed.

Natalie curtsied. "Until later."

Greenwich and Kissinger rose to their feet.

She gave them a nod, then signaled Daphne, waving toward the door. "Come along, we don't want to be short of time."

Daphne stood and offered her own curtsy before both women took their leave. Christian's ire grew as he watched Natalie disappear into the hallway. It would serve her right if he refused whatever she came up with. Perhaps he would do just that.

"I could use some fortification, gentleman." Kissinger smoothed his cravat.

"I was thinking the same." Christian reached for a tumbler from the sideboard, poured three fingers of brandy into it, then passed the decanter to Kissinger. "Won't you join us, Greenwich?"

"Mother will have a fit if we arrive to dinner already in our cups." Greenwich accepted the decanter. "But, one or three will not hurt."

Christian chuckled, clicking his glass against the one Greenwich now held. "Cheers."

"You better get those dancing shoes ready," Greenwich jested, looking at Kissinger.

"I am rather looking forward to it. It has been some time since I held something so pure." The duke winked.

"You had better not debauch my cousin." Greenwich took a long draw from his tumbler. "She is a sweet girl, not at all accustomed to spending time with gentlemen the likes of you."

"Fear not, she will be safe with me. I have no desire to find myself trapped in the parson's noose."

Christian's mind wandered back to Natalie, shutting out the banter of his friends. She seemed to be in good spirits despite her impending nuptials. Her mischievous nature had certainly been alive and well. Was she happy about the arrangement or had she simply not been told

as of yet? Perhaps she was biding her time—processing her impending fate. Heaven help them all if she were plotting for he could not imagine her quietly accepting the dictate if she did not wish for the match.

“What has you woolgathering, Knightly?” Greenwich poured more brandy into his glass.

“Nothing, I was savoring the brandy was all,” Christian lied, not wishing to discuss his musings. Natalie had occupied far too much of his time already.

“It is high quality.” Kissinger emptied his glass in one quick drink. “Almost as good as my own private stash.”

“You act surprised, as though you are at a village tavern rather than a duke’s estate.” Greenwich sat his empty glass on the sideboard. “Speaking of your location, we had better join the others in the drawing room. The dinner bell will be sounding shortly.

They turned down the corridor that led to the drawing room, Natalie and Lady Daphne stood conversing in the middle of it with another lady. Christians pulse sped with irritation. Was there no escaping her? He’d had all he could tolerate of her company earlier and had hoped to get the meal over with and retire with his friends.

“Bradford, do come say hello to Lady Gertrude,” Natalie called out.

Christian followed as Greenwich approached the trio of ladies, his head suddenly pounding. Introductions were made, the lady being another cousin. At least her voice did not grade on him as Natalie’s did. It appeared that most of the family had arrived early. The last thing Christian wished to do was spend his time acting proper and chatting with young marriage-minded misses. Why had he agreed to attend this affair? He swallowed past the knot in his throat. He’d agreed because he had no other place to go—with no family to speak of. Christian wanted nothing less than to spend another holiday in a gaming hell or at his gentleman’s club.

“Do be gentlemen and escort us into the drawing room.” Natalie smiled, taking Christian’s arm.

His friends proffered their arms to the remaining ladies before they all proceeded down the hallway.

Natalie slowed her steps causing them to fall behind the others. “I have decided on your forfeit,” she whispered.

He glanced down at the folded stationary she held in her free hand. What game did she play at now?

“Take it and do be sure no one else sees its contents.” She shoved the note into his coat pocket before increasing the pace of her steps once more.

He drew to a stop outside of the drawing room door, allowing the others to enter before he removed Natalie’s hand from his sleeve. “If

you will excuse me.” He stepped into the room without allowing her time to speak and moved into a secluded corner, before pulling her note from his pocket.

Meet me in the greenhouse after supper. Come alone.

~Nat

Whatever could she be about? He shoved the stationary back into his jacket. Dare he honor her most improper request? The way his stomach soured warned him not to—still, he was most curious to discover why she summoned him in such a way. He glanced around the room in hopes that no one had seen him before moving to the table.

Chapter 5

Natalie paced between a potted hibiscus and her mother's beloved orchids, waiting for Christian to show himself. Surely he would come as she'd bid him to. She flipped open her fan and waved it in an effort to cool her nerves. What if he did not, or worse, brought a chaperone? She should have embellished and claimed to have one along. But then, it was not as though the two of them had never been alone. As children, they often found themselves in such a state.

Oh, but they weren't children anymore. Society would never stand for them being unaccompanied. He was not the type of man to be fooled into a scandal. She tapped her fan against her thigh. Why had she not thought of propriety before penning her note? Not that she would have arranged for a chaperone, but she most certainly would have claimed to have seen to it.

She reached the orchids once again and turned back toward the hibiscus, her eyes now trained on the greenhouse entrance. The warm air added to her unease as she watched and waited. She would allow another five minutes. If he failed to arrive, she would seek him out. No way would she allow him to get away with leaving her out here alone. Not when he knew she was waiting for him.

The cinnamon scent of mother's favorite orchid tickled her nose as she rounded the pots once more and stopped to inhale it more deeply. They were such exotic, refined blooms, though she would never understand her mother's obsession with them. She had gone as far as employing expert gardeners with the sole purpose of tending her orchids. On more than one occasion, Mother had even instructed Natalie to be graceful and strong like the flowers.

Natalie feathered her fingers over one thick stem, then without thought, broke it off and stuck the flower in her hair. Mother would be vexed to discover what she'd done, which made Natalie exceedingly please. She jumped at the creak of the door opening and ducked behind a nearby fern as though she'd been caught with her

hands in the Christmastide desserts.

Glancing from behind the fern, her stomach dropped. "Bradford,"—She came out into the open—"What are you doing here?"

"Knightly asked me to come in first."

She released a breath she hadn't known she had been holding. Christian was here. "You cannot stay."

"I must. It would be highly improper to leave you unchaperoned with a man we are not related to." Bradford smirked, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Natalie stepped up to him, placed her hands on his shoulders, and began pushing him toward the door. "Nothing untoward will happen as long as you leave now."

Oh, why had she failed to think of a chaperone? Now Bradford had his nose squarely in the center of her scheme and he'd surely ruin everything.

A mischievous twinkle lit his eyes and he chuckled. "Nothing untoward will occur at any rate. Knightly has no wish to ruin you."

Natalie's face warmed and she gave another shove. "Mind your own affairs."

"Perhaps I should tell Mother what you are about."

"You would not dare! You cannot. Imagine what she would do, Bradford." Natalie dropped her hands from his shoulders and gave him her best pouty look. "What do you think I am about? You act as though I am some sully maid," She peered at him, her blood heated with angry indignation. How dare he think she was going about, carrying on trysting with men? No matter it was exactly her intended purpose...he should not assume such from her.

"Do calm yourself. Getting your skirts in a knot will change nothing." Bradford shook his head. "We both know what you are doing here."

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat. He was correct, she could no more lie to him than she could herself. "I beg of you, do not say a word to anyone."

"You are quite entertaining." He chuckled while he walked toward the door. "I will be directly outside should Knightly require my assistance."

"You may well be the one in need." Natalie reached for a nearby pot and flung it toward him. The projectile missed him, crashing into the floor. "You are not entertaining in the least."

"You had better clean that mess up or Mother is certain to discover what you've been getting up to without my having to tell her." His deep chuckle only increased in volume as he disappeared from the greenhouse.

She ought to have known he was teasing her. He no more wished for their parents to know his friend was secretly meeting her than she did. In retrospect, bringing Bradford along was a good plan on Christian's part. As much as it pained her to admit it, he would ensure no one caught them alone together. Natalie released a sigh, then smoothed her skirts before Christian entered. Her heart pounded—this was her chance.

She stood still with one hip cocked to the left as he stepped into the greenhouse and approached her. "Lord Knightly, I am pleased you came."

"You should be equally pleased that your brother was the only one to notice your note. Are you trying to get ruined?"

She swallowed at the harshness of his tone. "On the contrary, that is why I told you not to show it to anyone. Though I must confess, I am pleased Bradford came along. He will make an excellent look out." She did her best to offer a charming smile despite her sudden nerves.

"And why would we need someone to watch out for us?" Christian leveled his penetrating stare on her.

She reached out a trembling hand and trailed the tips of her fingers across his strong jaw. Even through her gloves she felt his warmth seeping into her—imprinting on her soul. "I want a kiss. One more passionate than the one you bestowed on Lady Pippa."

He took her wrist in his hand, pulling her fingers away. "Lady Pippa?"

"Do not attempt to dissuade me with denial. I witnessed your tryst with my own eyes." Natalie waved her finger at him.

Christian arched one dark brow. "I must confess, I am fascinated. Do go on."

"You well know what happened." Natalie placed her hands on her hips. Her blood warmed with frustration.

"Indeed, I do, and there was no kissing." Christian rubbed the back of his neck as he retreated a step. "Nor will there be any—"

"There most certainly was!" She would not allow him to pretend otherwise. "I came in search of you for set...the one you signed my dance card to reserve...imagine my surprise when I found you escorting Lady, and I use the term loosely, Pippa out onto the veranda."

Tears moistened her eyes but she refused to shed them. "I followed the two of you. By the time I located you, in an exceedingly dark corner, I might add, you had her wrapped in your arms." She glared at him, challenging him to deny his actions further.

"She was ill. I followed her out to ensure she was all right."

Natalie leaned closer, pursing her lips. How dare he continue to lie?

He released an exasperated sigh. "It was not a tryst."

She tilted her head, examining him. Could he be telling the truth? Images from that night assaulted her memory, the details as crisp in her mind as they were all those weeks ago. Pippa had been pressed against Christian, her head tipped back, lips parted. Natalie knew what had happened, she'd witnessed their secret moments. Her eyes had not deceived her nor had her imagination tricked her. "Admit it. You are only in attendance because you hope to see Lady Pippa once more—pick up where you left off."

"You know not what you speak of." He challenged her with his narrow gaze.

She glanced away and inhaled a steadying breath. She'd go mad if she continued on this course. There was no going back—nothing could be undone—unseen. The past would remain as it was regardless of what she wished for or he claimed. "Call it what you will." She closed the distance between them, pressing her body against his—relishing the heat that radiated between them.

He pulled back slightly as she tipped her head, meeting his gaze. "I would have my kiss now."

"I do not find myself agreeable at this time." He retreated toward the door. "Good evening, Lady Natalie."

Her stomach sank and she raced after him, grabbing hold of his coat sleeve. "You lost our game. As a result, you owe me a forfeit of my choosing. You cannot simply refuse."

Why would he wish to deny her request in the first place? Gentleman kissed ladies in private all the time. He had no issue with bestowing his kiss on Lady Pippa. Could he still be cross with her over saving him from that runaway carriage so long ago? Had his ego truly been so bruised that he still desires to even the score? If so, he would find himself sorely disappointed because she had no intention of allowing him to win this standoff.

She pressed a hand to her belly. Was he so in love with Pippa that he found no interest in her? A knot formed in her throat and she swallowed passed it. If he loved another—could her kiss prove she was the better choice? Even if she did convince him, how would she sway her parents? She'd not go mad worrying over such musings right now—there would be time enough for that later. Right now, her focus had to remain on gaining his kiss.

He met her gaze, his jaw clenched. "I will make good on my debt at a time and place of my choosing. This, my lady, is neither."

Before she had time to recover her wit, he stalked out of the greenhouse, allowing the door to slam in his wake. She opened the door and stared after his retreating form, her jaw slack with indignation. A time and place of his choosing!

How dare he?

This was far from over. She would achieve her goal—and she would do the choosing of place and time, as well.

Chapter 6

Christian tossed his cards down on the table. This was the third hand in a row where he did not have a single card to play—nothing. Should the trend continue, he'd be returning to London a pauper. His depleted funds would be all Natalie's fault, too. He could scarcely try to focus, let alone achieve the state, since her little stunt in the greenhouse.

He pressed his lip together in a tight line.

How dare she?

The absurdity of cornering him, demanding a passionate kiss, accusing him of trysting with Lady Pippa... Had she lost her mind?

"Folding again, Knightly? How am I to raise the stakes against you if you cannot play out your hands?" The Duke of Kissinger lifted his tumbler of brandy and took a drink.

Christian rubbed his hand over his jaw. "You have already won a small fortune from me this evening."

Greenwich tapped his fingers on the surface of the card table. "Rotten luck indeed. Perhaps you need to drink faster." He chuckled before draining his own cup and beckoning a servant for a refill.

Christian gave a grin, leaned back in his chair, and sipped his brandy while his friends played out their hands. Drinking faster would no more improve his odds than granting Natalie her desired kiss would bring him peace.

Her words spun through his mind. Trysting with Pippa... demanding a passionate kiss of her own...the fire in her eyes as she challenged him. Why could he not wash Natalie from his mind? Did he wish to kiss her? He bet her lips were silky soft and her mouth sweet. He shook his head, then took a large swallow of brandy, savoring the burn as the liquor blazed a trail into his belly.

He could not be attracted to Natalie. She was far too spoiled and entitled. Her mere presence aggravated him. Besides, the hoyden was his best friend's sister. Hell, she might as well be his for all the time

they spent together over the years. Natalie needed a husband—not a lover. He would never be a husband, leastwise not a good one.

“Are you in?” Greenwich asked, shuffling the deck of cards.

Christian nodded. Perhaps, he could focus long enough to win a hand, earn back some of his lost coin.

Kissinger drummed his fingers on the table. “Deal already, Greenwich, before I am forced to accuse you of fleecing us.”

“With skills as refined as mine, cheating is not necessary.” Greenwich chuckled as he began dealing the cards.

“Careful, old friend. An overabundance of confidence has been the downfall of many a man.” Kissinger gave a slight nod before returning to his drink.

Greenwich smirked. “Pray, let none of us meet such a dreadful state.”

Kissinger contemplated Christian for a moment. “Perhaps that is your issue. You were rather full of yourself last week at White’s.”

“Bloody hell, Kissinger, mind your own cards.” Christian scooped his newly dealt hand from the table and fanned them out before him. He considered them, two low spades, the king of hearts, four of diamonds, and queen of clubs. Someone might as well club him over the head—put him out of his misery. He tossed the cards down. “I’m out.”

“We have barely begun.” Greenwich protested. “Bets have not yet been placed. You cannot fold.”

“I need not continue in order to know how the game will play out for me.” Christian stood, then tossed a coin into the center of the table. “Now, if you will excuse me.”

He exited the room with his hands clenched in his pockets, intent on seeking comfort in the smoking room. His muffled boot steps on the hallway carpet kept pace with his heartbeat as he made his way down the maze of corridors leading to his desired destination. What a rotten party this was shaping up to be.

Distant echoes of merriment, laughter, and conversation, as well as whimsical pianoforte notes, drifted toward him as he turned down another hallway. Most of the guests had arrived, the house had become overrun as a result. Perhaps he would be best served by retiring to his room for the evening. Better yet, taking his chances in the storm as the grey gloom and heavy winds would suite his mood. Lord knew he was not fit company for anyone at present.

The familiar melody of a favored childhood Christmastide carol began to play. As a child he had spent many a Christmastide singing *Deck The Halls* with Mother. Christian failed to notice he had followed the sounds until he found himself standing outside of the music room door. He peeked inside, his body more relaxed than it had

been all day.

Blazes, his pulse increased. Natalie sat at the pianoforte, her pale, blond hair piled loosely on top of her head and eyes sparkling as she played. Witnessing her like this—not causing mischief, doing something so feminine—made it hard to equate her with the heathen he was familiar with. He leaned against the door frame, studying her.

A shiver of pleasure trickled through him. She very much put him in mind of his dearly missed mother. Blessed with both beauty and grace, Natalie was the kind of woman a man should be proud to call wife. But he knew better, she was no proper English rose.

Turning his attention to the other occupants of the room, he noted Lady Daphne stood to Natalie's left singing along with her cousin. The Duchess of Sheriden sat near the fire on a wing back chair, an unfamiliar lady beside her. The Duke of Sheridan also kept company with someone Christian did not recognize. Some lord or another man of importance judging by the man's appearance. They stood near the mahogany sideboard sipping drinks and chatting. Several others occupied the room as well, but none who interested him as much as the strangers did.

Who could they be? Had Natalie's betrothed finally arrived? A pang of regret struck his heart.

Why had he not asked more questions about the gossip? He wished he had taken the time to discover who Natalie's intended was. Maybe he could have learned something about the man. What if he was the unsavory type? As a gentleman, he would be forced to take the news to her parents. Then what? Marry her himself?

His gaze roamed back to her. He studied the bow of her lips, darting his tongue out to wet his own. Perhaps one kiss would not be a miss. He did owe her a forfeit. An honorable man would not comply. But a dishonorable one would pay his debt, debauch the lady, and move on.

Christian had never been accused of being an honorable man. Not that anyone had ever called him dishonorable—they had not. Despite his rakehell ways, his reputation had not been overly tarnished. He simply lived by his own rules and code of conduct, mostly in line with society. Perhaps giving her one kiss was exactly what he should do. Follow his rules, his choice of conduct, so what if his wishes aligned with Natalie's desires. They would both win.

He sighed and started to turn from the room. Natalie's gaze collided with his, freezing him in place. *Bloody hell. Move.* His heart skipped a beat when she gave a slight nod. Her stare held his as she played the final notes before breaking their connection and offering the guests a charming smile.

A smart man would take this opportunity to disappear. Perhaps he

was not a smart man for he stood, waiting. Wanting to speak with Natalie, wishing to grant her the kiss she desired.

She stood from the pianoforte, glanced at her parents, then sauntered toward the door. Try as he might, he could not pull his attention from the sway of her hips—could not force himself to flee.

He managed a step backward as she came into the hallway.

“I had hoped to see you again this evening, my lord.” She offered a sultry smile. “Have you reconsidered my invitation? If so, I will give you a place and time of my choosing.”

Invitation, his foot. She’d demanded, and now attempted to control the game again. He would not stand for it. “As I told you previously, I will do the choosing, my lady.”

He was determined to play by his rules.

Her eyes narrowed. “It is not me who owes the forfeit.”

“Ah, but it is you who desires to have my lips pressed to yours.” He gave a rakish grin. “Perhaps we can come to terms on the morrow.” Christian winked, then walked away, leaving her staring after him, her mouth agape.

Every nerve ending demanded he turn back, to go to her. Accept whatever terms she set forth. Instead, he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Step after step, until he reached the safety of his room.

Chapter 7

Natalie dropped the ivory spillikins onto the table between her and Daphne. They had been playing most of the morning while Mother saw to the family's guests and her father stormed around the house wondering where Lord Maddox was. Why he had not yet arrived for the Christmastide party?

The game provided a much needed escape from everyone. Not to mention, the imminent meeting between she and her soon-to-be betrothed.

"It is your move." She glanced up at Daphne.

Daphne hooked one of the pieces and lifted it from the pile. "Where did you disappear to after the evening meal last night?"

Natalie's hook slipped from her fingers, clanking against the hard surface of the table. "I did not disappear." She retrieved the hook and made a show of studying the game pieces.

"I had thought to see you in the parlor with the other ladies. When you were not there I assumed you snuck off." Daphne rubbed her finger over the rounded edge of the last spillikin she had retrieved. The tone in her cousin's voice told Natalie that she was likely more upset she hadn't the opportunity to forgo another dull evening trapped in a room with women old enough to be their grandmother.

"Well, you assumed wrong." Natalie hooked a game piece and attempted to still her hand enough to remove it without disturbing the others. "Drat," she exclaimed as she dropped her intended figure back onto the pile.

She'd been distracted ever since spotting Christian outside of the music room—before that, her lack of focus began when he arrived at Harrington Gardens. In conjunction, Daphne's question had caught her unprepared. Perhaps she should confide in her. With Pippa gone, she could use a new friend. Daphne had always been a sweet girl. Could she trust her? It would not do for anyone else to discover her untoward endeavors. As it was, she could not guarantee Bradford

would keep his silence on the matter.

Where was Bradford anyway? She glanced toward the hallway, hoping he would reappear. "What do you suppose we should play when my brother and his friends decide to grace us with their company?" They should be arriving to pay Bradford's forfeit soon and she had yet to determine what activity would serve best for her purposes.

"Why not allow them to choose?" Daphne plucked another ivory piece from the table with ease. "After all, they did not have to agree to spend time with us."

"Oh, yes, they did. Leastwise, Bradford did. Do not forget he owed me a forfeit from Doctors." Natalie successfully captured a game piece.

"All the same, the duke and Lord Knightly graciously agreed. It would harm nothing to let them choose the afternoon game." Daphne sighed, turning her attention toward the window. "I am certain they must be dreadfully bored trapped within the house because of the storm. No doubt they'd rather be outside enjoying the things men do, hunting, riding, visiting the village tavern..."

"Spillikins has grown tedious." More accurately, conversing with Daphne had.

Natalie stood and stalked to the drawing room window to peer out at the storm. Her cousin was daft, suggesting they give the *men* a choice. Even if Natalie did not have ulterior motives, and in this case she was not certain she did, it would be foolish to give Bradford control.

"Very well. We have been playing for hours and my back is stiff from sitting." Daphne rose, coming to stand near Natalie. "Perhaps we should take a turn around the room or down the hall while we wait for the gentlemen?"

"You are welcome to do as you please. I would prefer to watch the storm." Natalie waved a hand in dismissal.

She watched the rain slanting against the window in large drops and the trees near the garden bowing in the wind. She had always found comfort in storms, though she did not understand why. Perhaps it had to do with their wild nature so much like her own. But unlike the raging wind and wild rain, she was trapped in her parent's gilded cage. All the while a storm raged within her—begging to be set free.

"Are you quite all right?" Daphne rested a hand on Natalie's shoulder. "You seem...not quite yourself of late."

Natalie released a frustrated sigh, leveling her gaze on her cousin. A pang of regret tugged at her when she noted the concern in Daphne's brown eyes. She only wished to comfort and help. Natalie should try not to be so hard on her. Still, she had no wish to discuss the secret longings of her heart, nor her former best friend's betrayal

with anyone. She certainly did not want to chat about her impending betrothal. If those were the only topics for conversation to be had during the Christmastide celebration, it would be best if Natalie sought out her room and slept until the New Year dawned. Certainly a new year would rejuvenate her—give her hope and direction.

She lifted Daphne's hand from her shoulder. "I am quite alright, I assure you."

"Please know I am here should—"

"Have you ever spied such lovely, ladies?" The Duke of Kissinger strolled into the room with Bradford by his side.

Daphne dropped into a curtsy. "Good afternoon, Your Grace, Lord Greenwich."

Natalie followed suit, her eyes trained on the door. Where was Christian? Her already foul mood soured further as she straightened her posture. Did he seek to avoid her? She forced a weak smile despite her upset. "Shall we wait for Lord Knightly?"

Bradford strolled further into the room, coming to stand before the hearth. "I fear he has bowed out of the afternoon's activities."

"Too much strong drink last night," the duke added.

Daphne inhaled sharply, her cheeks tinting pink.

"I can imagine," Natalie said, through clenched teeth. The rogue had to be avoiding her, but what did he hope to achieve by doing so? It did not signify as she would not let him get away with it. "Your forfeit is forgiven. I no longer wish to play a game."

Bradford gave a knowing smirk. "All the same, I will stay."

Natalie glared at him. "Do as you please but you will have to excuse me. I have correspondences to answer." She started toward the door.

"Natalie, I would like a word with you...in private."

She halted and glanced at the duke and Daphne before turning back to Bradford. "I am quite certain this is not the proper time."

His Grace stepped closer to Daphne. "Do not concern yourself with us, Lady Natalie." He proffered his arm to Daphne. "Would you be so kind as to join me for a walk in the greenhouse?"

Daphne's eyes rounded. "I...but...it would be most improper."

Bradford signaled a nearby servant. "Do attend Lady Daphne on her walk."

"This is most uncalled for. I told you I do not wish to talk. I have important things to do." She looked from Bradford to Daphne. "And she clearly has no wish to go with His Grace."

Daphne rested her fingertips on the duke's coat sleeve. "Actually, a walk sounds pleasant so long as we are chaperoned."

"Which, thanks to Lord Greenwich, we are." The duke gave Daphne a scandalous wink causing her already pink cheeks to go

crimson.

"I am always happy to help." Bradford smirked. "Enjoy your stroll."

Natalie released a sigh as she watched Daphne and the duke take their leave. Once their footfalls faded down the hall she spun on Bradford. "I will not discuss the greenhouse with you."

"You would if you truly wished to keep Mother from finding out."

"You no account scoundrel. This is just like you." She placed her hand on her hip.

He laughed, vexing her further.

"Out with it then." She glared at him, knowing he had her trapped.

"You are not as fun as you once were, Nat. Where has your stubborn resistance gone?" He lowered himself onto a chase.

"What game do you play at?" She leaned toward him a fraction, challenging him.

"Come sit. I have no wish to argue. On the contrary, I am concerned about your well-being."

Like he was concerned about her reputation last night? She would wager he'd only come to the greenhouse in order to protect Christian from the parson's trap. This was no different, he had a motive all his own and it had nothing to do with her happiness. "You have no reason to fret over me."

"Do stop carrying on and come sit. My concern is genuine."

She reluctantly sank into a high-back chair across from him. "If this concern of yours has to do with Christian, there is no need."

"You are my sister and I love you despite our rivalries. I wish for nothing more than your happiness." He reached across the space separating them to capture her hand. "Are you pleased with Father's arrangement for you or simply resigned to the fate he has chosen for you?"

She pulled her hand free. "What difference does it make? My duty is to the dukedom—to Father and Mother."

"Are you seeking to cause a scandal with Knightly in order to escape the betrothal?" He stared at her.

She lowered her gaze to the floor, tracing the grains in the wooden boards. What was so bad about seeking to experience a little passion before allowing herself to be sold for the family's gain? "You have a distorted view of my ambitions."

He remained silent until she met his gaze once more.

"Are you quite certain? I do have eyes, as you are well aware, and they are in perfect condition." He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "The way you look at Knightly speaks volumes."

Did she hope for more than a kiss? Of course, she wanted a future with Christian, but that did not mean she was seeking to sabotage her

betrothal. She wasn't—was she? “Do not concern yourself with the way I do or do not look at gentlemen.”

“As your brother, I am compelled to make you understand that Knightly is not the marrying type. If you continue down this path, you will find yourself ruined. I assure you he will not step in to make an honorable lady of you.”

“That is a fine way to speak about your longtime friend.”

He leaned forward. “My sister is my first concern. Knightly would agree with my words and take no offense, I might add. He has no illusions about himself.”

Natalie stood, then leveled a seething stare on Bradford. “Duly noted.”

She turned and fled from the room, unwilling to discuss the matter further. She did not give a wit what her brother, parents, or anyone else for that matter, thought about Christian. She loved him—always had, and no betrothal would change that. Neither could Lady Pippa or Lord Maddox change her mind.



Christian stepped toward the wall to get out of the way at the sight of Lady Natalie running down the corridor, her pink skirt clutched in her hand. What in Hades was she up to now? His curiosity got the better of him and he moved back into her path.

She ran right into him nearly knocking them both to floor. He wrapped his arms around her to steadying them. She placed her arms around his shoulders and he pulled her close on instinct. “Bloody hell. What are you running for?” The emotion in her eyes gave him pause. She was clearly upset about something.

Natalie wriggled out of his embrace but held onto his coat sleeve, dragging him through a nearby door.

He took her by the shoulders, holding her at arm's length. “What is afoot?”

She moved his arms from her shoulders and pressed herself against him once more. Her breasts molded to his chest and she stood on her toes and pressed her lips to his in a chaste kiss.

His heartbeat kept rhythm with hers as he held her close, relishing the feel of her. He fought the sudden urge to deepen the kiss and pulled away.

“Stop playing games. Kiss me like you did Pippa.” She stared deep

into his eyes.

He had never kissed Lady Pippa—never even considered it. Why was the minx determined not to believe him on the matter?

“Christian,” she pleaded in a breathy whisper.

The sound of his given name on her sweet lips undid him. He brought his mouth to hers, hungry with need. A soft moan floated from her mouth as she parted her luscious lips, granting him full access. He dipped his tongue into her honeyed sweetness as he pulled her closer—so close it was impossible to tell where he ended and she started.

She wound her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck, greedily accepting what he offered. Her lips molded to his as he slanted his mouth over hers again and again, sliding his tongue into her mouth to rub against hers. Her soft moans pushed him to the edge, threatening to topple him right over. When had he ever tasted something so sweet? Held something so tempting?

He trailed kisses across her jaw to her throat, pausing to suck and nibble at the hollow beneath her ear where her pulse beat an untamed rhythm, matching his own.

“It seems I chose the place and time after all,” she said.

Her breathy voice encouraged him until the words she spoke broke through the trance she’d placed him under. The little hoyden had bested him once again. He pulled back and swallowed hard. His body thrummed with a need he could not indulge—leastwise not with Natalie. “Well played, my lady.”

She reached for him but he retreated, unable to trust what he might do should she intimately press herself against him again. “You have collected your forfeit.”

“I want you to kiss me again—not because you owe me, but because you want to.”

The passion reflected in her eyes stirred him in a way nothing else had. He leaned forward, his lips brushing hers. What the hell was he doing? This was Greenwich’s sister. She was to be betrothed. He had no plans to marry her or anyone for that matter.

She pushed closer, need coiling through him. He used all of his restraint to set her away from him. “There will be no more kissing between us.” God he wanted her. Desired to have all of her, not just her kisses. She was an innocent—his best friend’s innocent sister. He could not allow himself to seduce her—or be seduced by her. He turned and hastily took his exit, seeking the much needed sanctuary of his bedchamber.

Chapter 8

“Lord Maddox should have arrived by now.” Father paced

across the room between where Mother, Natalie, and Bradford stood by the fire. The Marquis and Marchioness of Bowmont stood by the floor to ceiling window in the family’s private parlor.

The storm raged on the other side of the glass—but, surprisingly, her father was more worried over Maddox absence than the earls own parents were.

Natalie secretly hoped the earl would never made an appearance. How could she marry him after what she and Christian had shared? His kiss seared her soul, imprinted on her in a way she would never forget. Somehow, someway, she had to get out of this betrothal. There was no possibility any man could make her heart race like Christian had—did, every time they were near.

“I assure you, Your Grace, it is not at all like my son to forgo his responsibilities.” The Marquis smoothed his cravat, the nervous reflex telling Natalie all she needed to know about Maddox.

Though they would not likely verbalize their fears, his parents were unsure he’d arrive at all. Did the earl know he was to be betrothed to her? Maybe he sought to avoid the union as well—if so, that would align them on the same path.

The Marchioness snapped her fan closed. “Something has happened to keep him away.” She turned toward the window, her eyes belying her feigned concern. “I do hope the storm is not to blame.”

Natalie closed her eyes and prayed it was not the storm to blame, for if it was, he would eventually arrive and she would have no recourse. *Please, let his absence be intentional.* If he did not wish for their union either, than there would be some hope of avoiding the betrothal.

“Perhaps we should search for him?” Mother turned to Father, her earbobs catching the light from the fire and casting sparkles across

the far wall.

"The storm shows no signs of letting up. If we venture into it, we will be placing ourselves in danger," Bradford argued.

"Lucas should have arrived by now. We cannot leave him out there...wherever he is. What if he has been hurt?" Marchioness Bowmont grabbed her husband's arm. "Someone should be sent to collect him—bring him here where he belongs."

Like a wayward child, Natalie sensed the Marchioness longed to add.

"Do not fret, my dear. I will go." The Marquis patted her hand. "Lucas is likely seeking shelter nearby. I will find him."

"The storm has made the roads impassable." Bradford strolled to peek out the window. "This is a fool's errand."

"Nonsense. I will have my carriage readied." Father turned his attention to Natalie. "You will accompany us and Bradford will remain here in case Maddox arrives."

Natalie clenched her hands into fists. The last thing she wanted to do was go out into the elements in order to search for a man whose acquaintance she did not wish to make. "Would Bradford not be of more help?"

"Fetch your cloak and meet us in the foyer. It is only proper that you attend your—the earl." He cut his words before saying your betrothed. Father gave her a no-nonsense look before turning to Lord and Lady Bowmont. "Be in the foyer in ten minutes' time." Father strolled to the door with Mother on his arm and the Marquis and Marchioness followed. "Do not dally, Natalie." He tossed the words over his shoulder before exiting the parlor.

She released a sigh as she stood to do her father's bidding. Ten minutes later, Natalie exited the foyer wrapped in her cloak as Father had demanded she do. The cool rain beat down on her and the wind whipped her cloak around her ankles as she crossed to their waiting carriage.

After settling onto the seat of the ducal coach next to her mother, Natalie gazed out the window at the house. Christian stood next to Bradford in the parlor window. Her heart hitched as she drank him in. Would she ever experience the sensation of his touch again? Could she bear it if she did not? Her body jerked as the coachman set the conveyance into motion, but her gaze held tight to Christian. Her stomach turned as she watched his form get smaller until she could no longer make him out—or mayhap he left his place at the window. She much preferred the thought of him standing at the glass as she departed, his longing for her growing with each foot that separated them.

The storm had turned the roads to mud, causing the carriage to

sway and jerk, tossing her from side-to-side in the cramped space meant for four. Her legs tingled from being pinned between Mothers and the coach's wall. She reached beneath her cloak to massage them and hoped Father would return them home soon. She wondered where they expected the earl to sit if they did find him. Natalie had half a mind to suggest she ride atop the carriage.

After travelling several miles and seeing no one, she realized before long they would be on Pippa's doorstep.

She sighed a little too loud, gaining Mother's attention and a reprimanding glare. Could her life become any worse? Not only had her closest friend betrayed her, now she would have to suffer more. She would have to be in love with a man she could not have—out in the elements, crammed in a coach searching for a man she did not want. Forced to wed a stranger and give up any chance at happiness.

The coach slowed, prompting Father to query the driver. "Have you spotted something?"

"A carriage, Your Grace."

Marquis Bowmont stood before the coach came to a complete stop and opened the door, sticking his head out.

Natalie held her breath, waiting to discover whether or not it was the earl's carriage.

The Marquis turned his attention to Father. "It has the Maddox crest." He closed the door, retaking his seat. "I do not believe he is within. The horses are missing and the wheels appear to be suitably stuck in the mud and muck caused by this dreadful weather."

Father knocked on the coach's window and waited for the coachman to open it once again. "Go see if anyone is with the carriage."

"There is an estate nearby. Perhaps he sought shelter there," Mother offered.

The coachman's face appeared in the window. "The conveyance is empty, Your Grace."

"Drive on to the Duke and Duchess of Midcrest's estate." Father settled back against the plush, velvet seat.

"Surely we will find Lord Maddox there. It is the only estate within walking distance." Mother smiled at Maddox's parents.

Natalie leaned her head back, closing her eyes. What she would give to sink into the seat and disappear at this very moment. Why did the backstabbing tart have to keep taunting her? Natalie wished to forget she'd ever known Pippa, to forget they were ever friends. Pippa kept finding her way into Natalie's life. At first it was with the letters Pippa had hand-delivered on a regular basis—Natalie always returned them unopened. Yet, Pippa still sent more. Now she had to compete with her for Christian's heart *and* rescue Lord Maddox from her

clutches. Not that she gave a whit for the earl, she certainly did not. All the same, she was now being forced to grace Pippa's drive with her presence. The woman would likely see great satisfaction in Natalie begging for her beau to be returned.

A deep seated ache gripped her as the coach bounced and jostled down the Midcrest's long drive. She could not help feeling as though she were on her way to great unhappiness. Mother had been correct in saying that Lord Maddox would have to be in residence for there truly was nowhere else nearby to seek shelter. He was either with Pippa or he had come to see foul play during the storm. No matter how angry and hurt Natalie was, she'd never wish harm or injury on another. That could only mean one thing—he had indeed been on his way to her party—on his way to become betrothed to her.

"We have arrived," Father announced as though they had come for a grand ball.

Natalie fought the rising nausea as the coachman opened the door and placed the steps down so they could depart the conveyance. She followed her parents onto Pippa's drive before Lord and Lady Bowmont joined them.

Moments later, The Duke and Duchess of Midcrest's coach pulled up behind them. Pippa's parents disembarked, joining their group.

Father turned toward the porch then went still.

Natalie remained rooted in place along with the others. A man had exited the house and now stood staring at them. Could he be Lord Maddox, future Marquis Bowmont? She swallowed nervously, spotting Pippa standing in the doorway, a queer look upon her face. What was it...sorrow...regret...longing? Natalie turned her attention back to the man. He, too, wore a mixture of emotions. The sight of which had Natalie's stomach seizing with dread.

"Good day, Father." Lucas nodded in the Marquis' direction. "And to you, Mother." He bowed to Marchioness Bowmont who stared down her nose at him.

Natalie's heart hurt for the earl after witnessing the reunion. She'd always thought her own parents to be cold, but they never regarded her or Bradford with such disdain. She bit her lower lip, unable to take her eyes from the scene.

"Maddox. We were worried you'd come to harm."

The Marquis' gruff tone assaulted Natalie's ears and she cringed. She would wager the only thing Lord Bowmont had worried over was what he stood to lose if she and Lord Maddox failed to wed.

"I'm sorry for your misfortune, Father," Lord Maddox retorted, his tone even and distant. "My carriage became stranded on the main road and I sought shelter from Lady Pippa until I could continue on."

Natalie clenched her teeth in annoyance at hearing Pippa's name.

Part of her desperately wished to turn her attention back to the traitor, but now was not the time.

"You were scheduled to arrive at the holiday party a full day before the storm hit."

"Yes, well, I had pressing matters to attend to, which delayed my departure from London by a day." The earl attempted to explain himself.

"Lucas," Pippa called. He glanced over his shoulder. Lady Pippa walked out the door and stood beside him, her smile infectious. "Mother, Father, you have arrived. I was so worried!"

Pippa raced down the front steps and halted before her parents.

Pippa had used the earls giving name. Natalie watched, fighting her rising anger as they hugged and more greetings were shared. Did Pippa have no remorse at all for what she'd done to her—and what it appeared she was currently doing? Taking Christian away from her had not been enough, now Pippa was taking the man Natalie was betrothed to as well? Indignation burned in her belly. She didn't desire Maddox, but lord help her if she'd ever allow Pippa to have him.

She could not remain quiet while Pippa betrayed her yet again.

"Lady Pippa is found in another compromising situation—alone with a gentleman for what...two full days?" Natalie whispered loud enough for all to hear. "Even after fleeing London, scandal finds her."

"I am more concerned with the man," Father said. "Carrying on thusly—very bad for my family name, my daughter, and business, I would assume."

Natalie glared at Pippa through the sting of Father's words. It should not surprise nor hurt her to hear him speak of business, after all, he had mentioned her as well, but deep down she knew his concern lay only with himself and the family name.

"This does complicate things greatly," the Marchioness of Bowmont confirmed, then turned to her husband. "Delward, what do you propose is to happen?"

The Marquis dropped his eyepiece and shook his head. "They are still properly betrothed. The paperwork is drafted and signed by all. The bans are to be read in a few weeks' time." He glanced from the earl to Natalie's Father, then back to the Marchioness. "I suppose our agreed upon dowry settlement could be adjusted to compensate for our son's lack of decorum."

"Betrothed?" Pippa asked. Her face immediately drained of all color as she looked between Lucas, his father, and Natalie. "Is that true?"

A satisfied smile curved Natalie's lips at Pippa's reaction. The traitor deserved every bit of humiliation she received—and far more.

She bit her lip, stopping herself from saying the very thing.

The Earl of Maddox shook his head. "Pippa, I—"

"You owe me no explanation," she choked out, her tone riddled with pain. "I am only sad you did not feel you could be truthful with me."

"If I could go back..." The earl let his words trail off.

As much as Natalie wished for Pippa to suffer, a part of her ached for the hurt she recognized so well—the same hurt she experienced over Christian.

"There is no need for all of that." Pippa slashed her hand through the air, signaling it was time for him to stay silent.

Natalie could not refrain from staring at Lord Maddox and she was not alone in her inability to look away—everyone had their eyes trained on him. Pippa with tears in her eyes, her parent's with concern for their daughter's well-being, and the rest holding their breath, no doubt waiting for him to deny ruining Lady Pippa. Natalie, on the other hand, prayed he would confirm the accusation. She held onto a flicker of hope, her heart pounding with anticipation. If it were so, she would be free. Certainly her parents would cancel the agreement with Maddox's family. Tying their family to a man whose name would be synonymous with scandal before Parliament resumed after the New Year would be disastrous.

Lord Maddox clutched the bottom of his coat in one hand. "Lady Pippa—"

"Let us go inside. I wish you all a merry Christmastide celebration." Pippa lifted her gaze, keeping her head high, as she took hold of her mother's arm. The door shut soundly behind her with a solid thud.

Natalie released a huff of air. Typical Pippa to hold her head high in the face of scandal. How did the tart manage to keep everyone fooled? Natalie should let everyone present know that *she*, for one, was not fooled by Lady Pippa's innocence act.

"Come, Boy." The Marquis of Bowmont motioned Lord Maddox to his side. "We have much to discuss and settle upon before anyone can enjoy the coming announcement."

Natalie's chest squeezed, her mouth going dry. Was she truly to be wed to the man Pippa seemed to love, while the man she loved pined after Pippa? She pulled her cloak tighter around her body, seeking comfort. The warm wool radiated heat but it did nothing to ease the ache in her heart. She could no more enjoy Pippa's set down than she could escape her own fate.

Chapter 9

Natalie leaned against the wall outside of her Father's office, her attention trained on the conversation inside. Her heart soared when she heard Lord Bowmont and Father arguing about breaking the betrothal. Perhaps there would be an escape from her impending fate after all. The image of Pippa's face riddled with hurt and betrayal flashed to mind. There could be no mistaking what she'd felt—Natalie knew the sensation all too well. Pippa did not fancy Christian, for if she did, she would not have fallen for Lord Maddox. But why then had she betrayed Natalie before?

Christian had denied anything ruinous happening between him and Pippa. What if he had been speaking the truth? She recalled their conversation.

"You well know what happened." Natalie placed her hands on her hips. Her blood warmed with frustration.

"Indeed, I do, and there was no kissing."

Had she been too quick to believe Pippa would betray her? Had her eyes deceived her? The veranda had been exceedingly dark that night and she stood a good distance from them. It was not outside the realm of possibility that something else entirely had happened. Perhaps Pippa had really taken ill and Christian went after her to offer aide. What if she had felt faint and fled to the veranda for fresh air then swooned into his arms?

More importantly, why hadn't she tried a similar tactic to get Christian's arms securely wrapped around her? Pippa never had possessed Natalie's flare for social interactions. She should have allowed Christian to explain.

Natalie placed a hand over her knotted belly. In her heart of hearts she did not believe Pippa betrayed her. She had been blinded by jealousy. Reacted without thinking beyond what she'd believed she'd seen. She had to make amends with Pippa.

Pippa deserved to be happy. All the better if Pippa found that

happiness with Lord Maddox, freeing Natalie from the unwanted betrothal. She had once been a dear friend and Natalie wished the best for her.

As fast as her hopes had soared, they crashed when Lord Maddox declared his desire to wed Natalie. She strained to catch more of the conversation through the closed door—how could she have been so wrong about what she'd saw between Maddox and Pippa? Her emotions swung wildly as the trio argued over her future. She should bust into Father's office and declare her own wishes—not that anyone inside cared what she wanted. Not once had she been asked if she was agreeable to the betrothal. She had made her feelings known to Mother and Father when they informed her of her impending nuptials, but not because they asked, and they had dismissed her wishes immediately.

"Where is he going? Bowmont, fix this!" Father's outraged voice echoed through the office door.

Drat, she'd missed whatever prompted his declaration. Who was leaving? Lord Maddox? It had to be based on what Father had yelled. Had he broken the betrothal? She backed down the hall as the office door was yanked open. Lord Maddox emerged. He paused and glanced down the hallway.

She should do her best to remain out of sight. Leave the *business* of her future to her Father. But Hells bells it was her happiness at stake. She deserved to know what had happened, to have a say in what *would* happen. She studied Lord Maddox for another heartbeat. He clearly wanted to leave. Judging by the screaming still issuing from her Father's office, the betrothal had been broken. She released a sigh of relief along with the residual anger she held toward Pippa.

"Lord Maddox." Natalie stood a few paces away and pointed down the long corridor. "The front door is that way."

She could not help but note the determination etched in his face along with a hint of regret. He looked back at her as though he, too, were reading her emotions. "I am sorry our meeting did not go as planned, my lady."

She had no use for his sympathy—no desire to hear his apology. "Your heart is settled elsewhere, I cannot fault you for that." Her arm fell to her side and her chin lifted in defiance. "No one asked where my heart lies."

"I know it cannot lie with a stranger," he responded, taking a step toward her. "There will be another, a far more suitable man for you."

She laughed hollowly. He would in no way leave her home thinking he had caused her injury. "Do not flatter yourself to think I could love you or feel any affection at all." She could not be more pleased with the outcome. Her only regret was in knowing her

parent's would never allow a match between her and Christian. Not even if he declared his love for her, which he had not, and never would.

His eyes widened at her words, a flash of disbelief crossed his face before he masked it. "Again, my deepest, sincere apologies for this muddled mess our parents have created for us. I also regret you hearing all that transpired within your father's study."

She shrugged off his apology. "This is best for all concerned. Your heart is elsewhere, as is mine. I do hope you and Pippa fare better. She is a lovely woman and deserves much happiness." The sincerity in her words surprised her, but she knew them to be true. The time had come to let go of her anger at Pippa. To close the festering wound and allow herself to heal.

"On that, we agree, my lady."

The silence between them lengthened as they stared at one another. Natalie could not fathom why he felt such a driving need to apologize. To make amends for something neither of them had any control over.

"Do call on me if you ever need anything, my lady. Your gracious acceptance of our parting ways is very noble."

"I fear the power to aid me does not reside with you." Sadness clutched at her again. "You should be going if you wish to arrive at Helton House before the storm hits once more. Do treat my friend with love and kindness—something I failed to give her when she needed it most."

Lucas crossed his arm over his chest in promise. "I will give her nothing but love and cherish her every day. I know she will be happy to see you, when you're ready."

Natalie was unsure when or how she would make her peace with Pippa and did not wish to contemplate it at present. "Maybe someday I will have the words to make my amends with Pippa, but for now, you are what is best for her."

"How can you know that?"

She pondered Lord Maddox's question for a second before answering. "She was genuinely hurt when she heard of our match. I have not seen such a betrayed look since it was I who wounded her. Now, you must go—before it is too late."

Natalie could not help but wonder if she had the same wounded look when she witnessed Pippa in Christian's arms.

Lucas gave her a quick bow. "Until we meet again, Lady Natalie. Do have faith that the right man will find you."

"And if he already has and walked away?" She blinked rapidly to hold back the tears.

"Then believe he will right his course and return to you."

The tiny flicker of hope she clung to ignited at his words. Perhaps there remained some hope for her and Christian after all.

Chapter 10

Christian glanced around the crowded ball room for the millionth time. Where were the Duke and Duchess of Sheridan? Greenwich? Natalie? What in bloody hell was going on? He had not seen any of them for hours. Lady Daphne, along with Lady Gertrude, had taken the roll of hostess upon themselves. Neither offered any indication of why the family failed to arrive at their own ball.

For all intents and purposes, everything seemed as it should. Ladies and gentlemen clad in silks and lace filled the room. Hundreds of candles flickered and the string quartet played elegant music as the most elite members of English society chatted and danced. The only thing wrong was the absence of the host family.

“Have a drink. Scotch will take the edge off.” Kissinger shoved a tumbler of golden liquor into his hand.

“I do not need to take the edge off.” Christian smoothed his cravat and glanced back at the entrance to the room. The quartet began a fresh set, leading with a reel. Pity this could not be Kissinger’s set with Lady Daphne.

“I cannot stop you from fooling yourself, but neither can you fool me. You have been edgy ever since Lady Natalie won your forfeit and it has only grown worse.”

Kissinger’s astute observation of Christian’s behavior vexed him. That was the trouble with close friends—one could not hide much from them. Rather than admit to anything, Christian raised his glass, taking a long drink. Perhaps the alcohol would ease his mind.

“Where do you suppose Greenwich is hiding?” Christian asked before draining the remaining scotch in one gulp.

The warmth from the liquor spread through his body. The scotch provided a much needed calming effect, though nothing could completely relax him. Natalie had his mind twisted in a way no woman ever had. He found himself concerned with her happiness and worried over what she believed of him. He’d spent his manhood as a

proud rakehell, a great rogue. Why should he care now that one hellion thought she'd seen him trysting?

He tried to remember that long ago night—he knew he hadn't set up an assignation with Lady Pippa, but had there been another woman? It seemed every ball before and after Natalie's come out rolled into one massive memory. Surely he was not with another woman that evening. An image sprung to mind—Natalie in a flowing white gown trimmed in lace and pearls. Her hair was in long curls, half-pinned up. He recalled the vision of her dancing like an angel—he'd been unable to look away all night.

How did he manage to remember her so clearly while nothing stood out about the rest of the evening?

"Last I knew, he had been ordered by the duke to wait for Lord Maddox's arrival." Kissinger nonchalantly pulled a flask of scotch from his coat and refilled both of their tumblers. Shaking the container in the space between them, he said, "Seems the time has come to retire to the gaming room."

Christian ignored his last comment, not at all concerned where his next drink would be. He searched his memory for the name, Maddox, but came up empty. Could he be Natalie's intended? "Who is Lord Maddox?"

"Lady Natalie's intended. The Earl of Maddox, to be exact. Future heir to the Bowmont Marquisship."

The air left Christian's lungs as though he'd been punched in the gut. "Do you know of this earl? I do not believe I have made his acquaintance." What was wrong with him? Since when did he worry more about a woman—a proper lady—a proper marriageable lady—than his next drink?

"I have heard his name from time-to-time around London. What is your interest?" Kissinger paused, studying him for a moment before continuing. "I've heard he is a temperate man, not fast to anger, but quick at cards—always a ladybird at his side."

Christian swirled the liquor in his glass. "Mere curiosity. Forget I asked." His concern came from not knowing what was afoot—but neither did he actually want to know anything of the man. All would return to normal once Bradford and his family arrived. He took another sip of the scotch, not believing his own lie but unwilling to accept the alternative.

Kissinger clapped him on the shoulder. "Ah, there is Greenwich. Let us collect him and go in search of more scotch."

Christian snapped his gaze up, searching. Greenwich strolled across the ballroom but Lady Natalie was not with him, nor were the Duke and Duchess of Sheridan. He released a pent up breath then made haste to reach Greenwich.

The stuffy air in the room weighed on Christian, causing him to sweat. He made his way through the crush, sidestepping guests and potted ferns alike. His sole focus, reaching his friend's side.

"Greenwich," he hollered. "Where are your parents and Lady Natalie? What is keeping them?"

"Father insisted on searching for Lord Maddox. He was found at Lady Pippa's and has since broken the betrothal."

Broken the betrothal? Lady Natalie was free from the obligation. Had Christian heard right? "She is not to marry?"

"It seems not, as the earl has—"

Kissinger approached, slapping Greenwich on the back. "We were on our way to the gaming room. Do join us."

"Correction, Kissinger was on his way. I will remain here for now." Eventually, Natalie would show herself and he was determined to be nearby when she did.

She may need a friend to lend her strength, a hero to rescue her from the *ton's* scrutiny. The gossips had been speculating about the grand announcement for days, and though he doubted anyone outside of Somerset knew the details, they were all expecting a confirmation tonight.

Kissinger raised his brows at Christian. "Things are deuced bad when you elect to remain in a ballroom. What in bloody hell am I not aware of?"

Greenwich exchanged a quizzical glance with Christian. "I fear I cannot leave at this moment either."

"Pray, explain yourselves," Kissinger demanded, before finishing the remaining scotch in his tumbler.

"Father commanded me to remain here until he arrived. I would be much obliged if one of you would seek out some of that scotch for me." Greenwich tilted his head toward Kissinger.

"I out rank the both of you. One of you should do the fetching." He gave Christian a playful shove. "I know not what your about, but surely it will prove entertaining. I am electing to remain as well."

Greenwich signaled a servant, ordering him to bring a decanter of scotch.

"To the ballroom, my lord?" the servant asked, eyes wide. At Greenwich's nod, the man scurried to collect their request.

"It is a pity that society does not call for strong drink at balls. They would be far more entertaining if we were encouraged to get deep in our cups." Kissinger chuckled.

"Indeed." Christian agreed, wishing he could get foxed— wishing he could wipe Natalie's passion-filled eyes from his mind. But it was not to be. He had a score to settle with her, he reminded himself. He would keep his wits intact in case the opportunity should arrive. He

would turn the tide—rescue her—not from the betrothal, but from the scandal of a broken one—the way she had rescued him all those years ago.

Chapter 11

Natalie had roamed the house, peeking into all the places she believed Christian might be—the smoking room, gaming room, his guest chamber...only to locate him in the least likely of venues...the ballroom. She stood still, not at all sure what she should do now. In her imagination she found him alone or caught his attention and signaled for him to join her. His gentleman companions would be far too engrossed in gaming, drinking, or both to notice her presence.

She could not simply wave him down now. Not in the midst of a crowded ballroom. Nor could she approach and request a private audience with him. The Duke of Kissinger would hear her and possibly several others who stood nearby. She nibbled her lower lip, contemplating. Christian was worth whatever risks she had to undertake, still there was no need to cause scandal with hasty actions. Christian was not a man to be forced into anything, especially a compromising situation that could end with the noose securely around his finger.

Natalie looked from Christian to Bradford, an idea forming in her mind. Enlisting Bradford's help was far from ideal. All the same, it remained her best option. For all she knew, Christian had revealed all to him. She fixed a smile on her lips and gracefully moved toward her brother and his friends, her head high as Mother had trained her.

Her pulse escalated with each step but her expression remained schooled as she came to stand before the gentlemen. "Good evening." She dipped into a curtsy.

"Lovely of you to join us, Lady Natalie." The Duke of Kissinger gave her a rakish grin. "Perhaps you will clue me in as to what has Greenwich and Knightly up in knots?"

Christian elbowed the duke. "Mind your manners, Kissinger. You are in the presence of a lady."

Natalie laughed, pretending ignorance on the subject His Grace queried. She turned her smile on Bradford. "Might I steal you away for

a moment?"

A servant approached with a decanter, offering it to Bradford. Natalie paused to examine the golden liquid inside as the Duke of Kissinger snatched the decanter from the tray. Scotch. They were imbibing in strong drink right in the middle of her parents' ball? She turned amused eyes on Bradford, giving a slight shake of her head.

He chuckled, accepting a freshly-poured tumbler from the duke. "Do not judge us, dear sister."

"Shall I pour you a glass as well?" The duke asked, a slow grin forming on his lips.

What a tempting offer. She had never indulged in anything stronger than wine. Mother would be amiss to discover her drinking liquor. Perhaps... "Thank you, Your Grace, I should rather like some scotch."

"The hell you will." Christian stepped between her and the duke.

Natalie sidestepped Christian and smiled. "I do believe I can make my own decisions."

"A woman with a mind of her own, how refreshing." The Duke of Kissinger held his tumbler out to her.

"Lady Natalie will not be drinking scotch despite her mind to." Christian glared at His Grace.

Bradford took hold of her arm, snatching it from mid-air. "Excuse us, gentlemen."

How dare Christian make her decision? What cause did he have to be angry? She strained to pay mind to their ongoing conversation as Bradford led her further away.

"You are a terrible wastrel." She heard Christian say behind her before both men broke out in laughter.

"I learned from you," the duke accused. "And what is your sudden interest in, Lady Natalie?"

Their voices faded, becoming inaudible as Bradford continued to lead her away. Natalie should find their behavior offensive. The duke most certainly crossed the lines of propriety in the way he interacted with her. Her brother and Christian had equally tarnished reputations despite their advanced social manners. Somehow, their crude behavior had the opposite effect—it excited her.

She glanced over her shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of the men as Bradford propelled her from the ballroom. "What is this about?" He hurried his steps. "Father will be harsh with us should he discover our absence from the ball."

"Are you afraid?" She shot him an amused smirk.

"Of course not. I am quite fearless as you know." He drew her to a stop inside of a private parlor.

"I do detest asking you such a favor." She blushed. "All the same, I

require your aid." She entwined her glove-covered fingers in front of her, lifting a silent plea for his agreement, and batted her lashes for good measure.

"Aid in what endeavor?" he asked, his tone softer than usual, almost soothing.

She shifted her feet before meeting his eyes. "Bring Christian to me."

"Is it Christian, now? What exactly transpired in that greenhouse?" He furrowed his brows.

"For heaven's sake, Bradford. As children we often used our given names. Nothing untoward occurred." Leastwise not in the greenhouse. She took comfort in knowing she wasn't lying. Her stomach filled with butterflies as thoughts of what happened during their next encounter came to mind. "I simply had a slip of the tongue."

"Hum." He tilted his head a fraction, studying her. "I may require my own private conversation with Knightly."

She stepped closer to him. "Please, do be serious. We both know you are attempting to get a rise from me. Will you help or must I retrieve Lord Knightly myself?"

That was not the approach she desired to utilize, however, she would if necessary. She owed it to herself to reveal her heart's desire—possibly owed it to Christian, as well. There had been a connection between them. A spark of something deeper when they had kissed.

To be honest, Natalie felt the draw to Christian years ago, while he still attended university and she still wore plaits.

He may not be the marrying type—or his roguish ways might be the result of not yet having discovered the perfect lady to compliment him. A lady who valued and admired his spirit, rather than one who wished to trap him for the sake of calling him husband, gaining his title, and the prestige that would come with being the Marchioness of Knightly.

If she sought to be a Marchioness, she could have just as easily married Maddox. Based on his father's advanced age, he did not have more than a decade before he passed to the next world and Maddox inherited his title.

Natalie only wanted to love Christian and have his love in return. His title mattered not to her nor did what he had to offer her family. The man, his charm, his touch, mattered to her. She had to declare her feelings, if not she would live with the unknowns and regret for the rest of her days. If he turned her away, so be it. At least she would know she did all she could. As Lord Maddox had said, it was not to be if Christian did not return to her. Her throat tightened and she silently pleaded with Bradford.

He turned away, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Bradford,” she prodded. “If you never again do anything for me, do this.”

He turned back to her, releasing a loud sigh. “Do not make me regret my actions. If ruin comes upon you, do not—”

Natalie beamed a genuine smile. “Thank you. Now hurry before my nerve is lost.” She shooed him from the room with a wave of her hand.

A sleek sheen of sweat dampened her brow. She dabbed at the moisture with her handkerchief, then began fanning herself. Christian would come through the door in a moment’s time. What would she do if he cast her aside?

What would she do if he embraced her? Mother and Father did not approve of him—would never give consent for a match between them.

The door opened a fraction and Christian slipped into the room.

“I am pleased you came. There is something I must say to you.” She looked at the plush carpet she stood upon then back to him.

“Natalie, I want you to know I never kissed, Lady Pippa. She—”

“You need not continue. I believe you and no longer care about the past.” She stepped closer to him. “Do accept my sincere apology.”

“If this is not about, Lady Pippa, then what?” He held her stare.

“Lord Maddox broke the betrothal.” She tried to read his blue eyes, but found nothing hiding in their depths. What was he thinking? She drew closer.

“Greenwich informed me of the day’s events.” He did not retreat but neither did he advance toward her.

She stilled within arm’s reach of him, her heart pounding—begging him to take her in his arms and hold her close. Kiss away all her doubts and uncertainties. “Your kiss woke something inside of me.” She ran her tongue across her lower lip. “For years I have fancied myself in love with you.”

He continued to stare at her, his face void of any indication that he felt the same. The fingers on his left hand twitched slightly. Did they seek to reach for her? She must know.

“If you do not want me, say so. I will go quietly and hold tight to the memory of our shared kiss for the remainder of my days.”

“Dammit, Natalie.” He pulled her against him, his mouth finding hers.

She wrapped her arms around him, holding tight as she matched his passion with all she had, relishing the feel of his hands on her back. A deep need coiled in her belly and she parted her lips, urging him to deepen the kiss.

Father stormed into the room. “Unhand my daughter, you no good scoundrel,” his voice boomed.

Christian released her and tried to step back but Natalie held tight.

She'd not give him up now. Come what may, she would fight for him until everyone accepted that she belonged with him. There could be no turning back—no denying their shared connection. She would lay down all she had for him. He owned her heart and soul.

Father stomped to where they stood, Christian with his arms at his sides, and Natalie with her hands twined in his coat. "Let go, Natalie. This instant!"

"I will not." She lifted her chin in defiance.

Father grabbed her, pulling until she lost her grip, then shoved her toward Bradford as he came into the room. "Hold her."

Natalie scrambled to regain her footing and return to Christian, but Bradford captured her first. "Release me," she demanded.

"Do not fight, Christian's voice penetrated her anger and she turned her gaze on him. "You will only make the situation worse."

Father grabbed Christian by his cravat and tugged him closer. "You are to leave my home at once and never return."

"No. You cannot do this, Father." Natalie squirmed in another vain attempt to gain her freedom.

Bradford whispered in her ear. "You cannot prevent his leaving. I warned you he was not the marrying type. I am sorry you got hurt."

She reached for Christian when he walked past her in calm, assured foot falls. He did not even look at her. Was Bradford correct? Should she let go of Christian? Tears picked at the backs of her eyes. She could not accept that fate, not without a fight. But it seemed he had already let her go—maybe never sought to hold her at all.

"What in heaven's name is going on in here?" Mother came to stand beside Father, her fan clutched in one hand. "The commotion reached halfway down the hall and Lord Knightly did not so much as nod when he strolled past me going toward the foyer. Now I see Bradford holding Natalie and"—she placed a hand on Father's arm—"You are clearly distraught. What has Natalie done now?"

"She went against my direct order. Tarnished the family name." He paced to the other side of the room. "I found her in a compromising embrace with Knightly."

Mother gasped. "We must see her wed at once."

Natalie went rigid in Bradford's arms. "I refuse. You cannot make me marry anyone."

"You will do as you are told or there will be severe consequences. We have spoiled you for far too long. It is time to grow up and act as a proper duke's daughter should."

"That includes marrying a man of your Father's choosing. A man who will not only advance the dukedom but also provide for you, while keeping our good name intact," Mother added.

Natalie leveled an icy glare on her Mother. She did not give a wit

about the dukedom or proper behavior. Not when her heart was splintering. Not splintering—it had disappeared, left with Christian.

“I will approach the Earl of Norton with an offer for a match between Natalie and his son at once. He expressed an interest in joining our families recently. I was unwilling to entertain the match because of Maddox. Clearly things have changed.”

She could stand it no longer. While her parent’s ignored her wishes and planned her future, Christian was getting away. She did not know what he felt, if he wanted a future with her. He’d not said, but she did know what her heart demanded. “I am sorry,” Natalie said as she stomped on Bradford’s foot with all her weight and sank her fingers into his hands, digging into them until he squealed in pain, releasing her.

Without pause, she fled from the room, racing toward the front door. She had to find Christian—the storm and her parents be damned.

Chapter 12

Christian mounted his horse not at all certain of why he had kissed Natalie in the way he had—with such depth of emotion—such heart, not just lust but true passion—or where he would seek shelter from the raging storm. Traveling any further than the village would not be an option with the weather once again gaining in intensity. The storm seemed to rage and calm in time with his own emotions. He oddly found comfort in the thought as he pushed his horse into a cantor leaving the safety of Harrington Gardens and the warmth of Natalie's embrace behind.

Would Sheridan have a change of mind once the situation sank in? If he did and chased Christian down demanding marriage would it be such a bad thing? He never thought of marriage in a positive light before. Now the idea seemed to be circling his mind—warming its way into his heart in much the same way Natalie herself had.

There was an unfamiliar ache in his heart. A longing to have her back in his arms—to keep her there forever. It was a sensation foreign to him. A need that was growing by the minute. What was happening to him? He tipped his face up allowing the rain to fall upon it. The cool drops were refreshing despite their sting but they did nothing to cool his blood, still warm from her passionate kiss.

He turned his attention back to the mucky roadway and slowed his horse a fraction. Could he let her go? His heart demanded he hold on as tight as she had back in the parlor, but his mind cautioned him to walk away. Somehow, a lifetime without the beautiful, obnoxious, sensual, hoyden by his side seemed unbearable.

Sheridan would come demanding Christian do right by his daughter. Any gentlemen would—would they not?

The most important question was: was he man enough to stand up and take his due—his punishment, of sorts. Though nothing about loving and holding Natalie every night for eternity seemed close to punishment. The true penance would be walking away only to see her

marry another, fall in love with another, have children with another. Would she hold that man tight as she had him? Certainly, he would not be as foolish as Christian to let her go.

He squeezed his eyes shut. What if her father did not bring him up to snuff? What if the Duke thinks him unworthy of his daughter? Wait a damn minute! He *was* suitable. He'd care for her—make her happy—love her forever. This was one game he would win.

The cards were stacked in his favor—which thankfully, aligned with Natalie's wants and desires.

Christian's pulse speed as he wheeled his horse around, setting a course for the Sheridan's home. He had not gone overly far and could easily reach her within the hour. Once back at Harrington Gardens he would make his intentions known. He would demand the duke accept his offer for Natalie. Should the man refuse, Christian would let the entire assembly know what had transpired between them. The duke would be forced to consent to the match or see his daughter and his precious name ruined.

The closer he came to Natalie the more confident he became. She had not embellished—there was something special between them. How had he been such a fool as not to see it sooner?

He rounded the final bend in the road and speed his horse into a gallop. Soon he would have everything he never allowed himself to dream of. A woman to love him, to challenge him, to befriend him—warm his bed and bear his children. Christian would cherish her for the rest of his life. The perfect hoyden. The woman he...

His heart skipped a beat as he pulled his mount to a stop. Natalie sat on the side of the road clutching her ankle and dressed in no more than the gown she'd worn back in the parlor. She was cold and shaking violently. He jumped from the saddle and ran to her side, kneeling in the mud beside her. He wrapped his arms around here.

"Christian..." Her breathy voice faded and he dropped a kiss on her cold lips.

"You are freezing." He released her long enough to remove his jacket and drape it over her shoulders. "What are you doing out here? What happened?"

"I came after you. I care not what my parents think. I need you. I love you, Christian."

He pulled her closer knowing with his whole soul that he had to marry her. His heart swelled with a new awareness. "I love you, too, Natalie." He kissed her again—a passionate kiss full of promise.

"Now tell me how you came to be here on the side of the road?" He reached for her foot and gently removed her slipper followed by her silk stocking. Her ankle was red and swollen.

"My horse became spooked and threw me. I landed awkwardly,

twisting my ankle. I was so afraid...so cold."

He lifted her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. "Hush now, love. I have you. I'll take care of you." He lifted her into the saddle before mounting. "We will be married at once."

She rested her head against his shoulder. "My father will never give his permission for us to wed."

He noticed the rain had turned to soft snowflakes. The wind settled a bit...it would be a white Christmas after all. A perfect holiday with the perfect lady at his side. "Do not fret, Natalie. Allow me to take care of you for once. I will see to your father. You have my promise. All will be well."

Before long, they reached Sheridan's drive. He bent, giving Natalie a sweet kiss before dismounting and carrying her into the house.

Bradford and Kissinger stood in the foyer wearing their cloaks and hats as Christian stepped inside.

"Good God, what happened?" Bradford looked them over.

"I have seen you look better after a long night of raising hell." Kissinger added.

"I've returned to claim Natalie as my wife."

His friends stared at him in shock.

"You want to step into the parson's noose?" Kissinger shook his head. "I have clearly imbibed far more than my share this night for I am imagining things."

Greenwich gave a playful shove. "On the contrary, you have not had nearly enough."

Christian continued with the tale, ignoring his friend's remarks. "It seems Natalie was unwilling to let me go either."

"You have no need to convey that to me. The hellion stomped my foot and attempted to break my hands." Greenwich smirked, shaking his head.

Christian looked down at Natalie. "Splendid move, love."

"You will regret encouraging her when it is you on the receiving end of her temper." Greenwich laughed.

Christian rubbed Natalie's shoulder as he cradled her, relishing the feel of her soft body against him. "I found her on the roadside after her horse threw her. Her ankle is sprained. We must send for a doctor and see her changed into dry clothing and tucked into bed at once. Have coals brought to warm her bed."

Bradford turned to the butler. "Send for the doctor at once." He

beckoned a nearby footman. "Have Lady Natalie's bed turned down and send her lady's maid to her room with all do haste."

Christian dropped a kiss on her forehead. "I must go speak with your father."

She held tight to him, gazing into his eyes. "Do not let me go. Promise."

"You have my word, love." He gave a reassuring smile. A shadow of doubt, or was it fear, crossed her striking blue eyes. If the duke sought to fight him further, they would soon find themselves journeying toward Scotland—if the doctor agreed her ankle was sound enough for the trip.

"No matter what my father says or does...you swear you will marry me?"

His heart hitched. "I swear it. You will be my wife if I have to abduct you and race to Gretna Green in order to see it done."

Natalie smiled, her eyes lighting with the same joy that filled his soul. She was his missing half and he would never allow anyone—certainly not the Duke of Sheridan—to take her from him.

"I love you, Lady Natalie Seymour, from now until forever."

Epilogue

One Year Later

Natalie laughed as she pulled the coins from the center of the table toward her. “Are you gentleman ready to admit my superior card skills yet or must I take more of your *allowance* first?”

Bradford and Kissinger, as she now called them, had elected to join her and Christian for the Christmastide holiday and had yet to depart her home—not that she minded. Natalie rather enjoyed having the pair around. They entertained her and brought out the rogue in her husband. Which is the part of him that Natalie had fallen in love with all those years ago—an aspect of his person he never lost, thank the heavens.

The four of them had been playing cards for several hours now, with Natalie winning most of the hands. Perhaps her skill came from avoiding alcohol in the afternoon while the gentlemen imbibed in Scotch with no regard for the time of day. But she preferred to believe she’d bested them of her own accord.

“Do not underestimate my wife.” Christian smiled at her from across the table. “She is a card shark of the first order. How do you imagine she acquired that fine ring on her finger?” He winked at her.

Natalie flushed at the memory. She’d won the ring in a game of strip whist with Christian soon after they were wed. Her face heated as he stared at her, lust shining in the depths of his eyes. He had won that night as well, and she would wager he recalled the memory at this moment. She glanced away not wanting her brother or Kissinger to catch on.

“Very well, I concede,” Bradford said, pushing his cards into the middle of the table. “When are Pippa and Maddox expected to arrive?”

Natalie had penned a long letter to Pippa, apologizing for the way

she had treated her and inviting her and her new husband for dinner. She missed her dear friend immensely and had many regrets over what had happened between them. "They will arrive within the hour."

"You never tell me what happened to cause the rift between the two of you to begin with." Bradford lifted his glass. "I must admit to a mild curiosity."

"A lady never shares her secrets nor does she talk about a private matter between her and a friend." She did not know if Pippa had ever spoken of their falling out in detail, but she had not and would not. She glanced between Christian and Bradford. "Why don't the two of you tell me how you convinced Father to allow my marriage? I have been wondering for almost a year."

"I offered to wed you myself." Kissinger leaned forward. "Turns out there is one man even more unacceptable than Knightly. Your father did not think my offer to *salvage your heinous and utterly ruined reputation* was worth saddling me to his family for all eternity."

"Oh, come now! My reputation could never be damaged enough to be repaired by a Kissinger man!"

Natalie burst out in laughter and was soon joined by the men. She knew there had to be far more to the story, but in the end, none of it signified. Christian had wed her—how he managed it did not matter. She stood and sauntered around the table to lower herself into his lap.

He put his arms around her, pulling her. "I'll never let go," he whispered in her ear.

A shiver of longing coursed through her, a smile tugging at her lips.

"Who needs a lady bird when one has a wife such as yours?" Kissinger took a drink of his scotch.

"Indeed. I am a lucky man." Christian gave her a little squeeze. "May both of you someday be so blessed."

Kissinger blanched. "I pray that I am not."

Bradford chuckled. "As do I, for the lady's sake."

A footman entered the room, interrupting their playful banter. "Lord and Lady Maddox have arrived."

Natalie stood. "Do show them to the drawing room." She reached for Christian's hand. "Come along."

A mixture of excitement and uncertainty turned her stomach. How would Pippa receive her? Natalie would not blame her if she held some residual hard feelings. She had treated Pippa terribly and for no other reason than blind jealousy. She pulled in a deep breath before stepping into the drawing room on her husband's arm.

She had only one wish this Christmastide season—to return her dearest friend to her.

Her gaze met Pippa's and she smiled, genuinely happy for the

chance to restore their friendship. "Thank you for accepting my invitation, Pippa."

Pippa immediately stepped forward and the two embraced.

"You are my dearest friend." Pippa said.

"Gentlemen, what say you we retire to the smoking room and allow the ladies some time to catch up?"

"Splendid idea," Maddox concurred.

It came as no surprise to Natalie that Kissinger took the lead in exiting the drawing room. Once they were all out of sight, she turned back to Pippa. "Do make yourself comfortable. I'll ring for tea."

Pippa positioned herself on a chaise and smoothed her skirts.

Natalie rang for tea, then joined her. "I am most sorry for what I did. As I stated in my letter, I have no good excuse."

"I forgave you the moment I stepped on the stage at the recital. I confess, I never did figure out what had angered you so, but I do not care. The past is where it belongs. You are a piece of my heart—one that has been missing for over a year."

"I misinterpreted your actions with Christian on the veranda at my come out ball. Jealousy turned me into a monster and I will regret my actions for the rest of my days."

"Do not waste another moment on the matter." Pippa smiled. "All has come right. We both found love and now we have our friendship as well."

"I am so very happy for you." Natalie took Pippa's hand in hers. "Tell me how you and Lord Maddox fell in love. I want to hear every detail."

Pippa beamed at Natalie. "Only if you agree to share your story as well."

Natalie's heart warmed. It was as if she and Pippa had never fallen out in the first place. They resumed their friendship right where it had left off, sharing secrets, laughing, and enjoying each other's company. She would never understand why Pippa so readily forgave her, but she would be forever grateful. Natalie would treasure their friendship forever.

Excerpt

Thank you for reading How to Kiss a Rogue. I do hope you have enjoyed it!

Pick up your copy of book one in the Connected by a Kiss series A Kiss at Christmastide written by Christina McKnight and read Lady Pippa and Lord Maddox's story today.

Turn the page for an excerpt from ENCHANTED BY THE EARL from Amanda Mariel's fairy tale based, bestselling Fabled Love series.
What reviewers are saying:

"This story is enjoyable and witty, featuring a delectable hero who swoops in to save the day in a timely fashion. Rose, Hunter and the sinister Dewitt seal the love triangle with charm, capturing all that is wonderful about a classic Regency romance." ~InD'tale Magazine
[magazine.indtale.com/magazine/2016/dec-jan/](http://magazine.indtale.com/magazine/2016/dec-jan/CC9EBEED6DA76D3A2FEAE56C69655791/Dec-Jan-Mag-2016-17.pdf)

CC9EBEED6DA76D3A2FEAE56C69655791/Dec-Jan-Mag-2016-17.pdf
"Enchanted By The Earl is a charming Regency-era romance. Author Amanda Mariel has created an extremely likeable pair of protagonists in Hunter and Rose. Hunter's wrestling with himself, trying to deny his growing attraction to and fondness for Rose, was particularly well-written and believable. He's definitely the kind of hero I'd love to see more of in Regency romances." ~ReadersFavorite
readersfavorite.com/book-review/enchanted-by-the-earl

"I liked both Rose and the Earl. The way they were built or depicted throughout the book emanates either innocence and sensibility, in Rose's case, or power and determination, in the earl's case. It was a fun way to pass time in the company of lovely characters, earls and ladies." - See more at: [theromancereviews.com/viewbooksreview.php?](http://theromancereviews.com/viewbooksreview.php?bookid=23494#sthash.Wbz4F06u.dpuf)
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Chapter 1

London 1813

The creak of carriage wheels pulled Rose's attention away from the garden, where, kneeling in the beds, she inspected the bright blooms she had tended all spring. Lady Julia Thorne's elegant barouche pulled to a stop outside the cottage Rose shared with her elderly grandmother. Heartbeat accelerating, Rose stood and dusted her hands on her apron, leaving streaks of dirt behind.

A tall gentleman with raven hair and eyes the shade of the mid-summer sky stood near the open carriage door. Rose caught herself staring at the strong lines of his jaw as he handed her client, Lady Julia, down from the carriage.

Her pulse quickened as her visitors drew nearer. She kept her gaze on the gentleman--he was the handsomest she had ever beheld. When he looked her way, Rose's cheeks burned at being caught ogling him so unabashedly. Lady Julia smiled as Rose approached. "Miss Woodcourt, I've come to select the cloth for my new frocks. Did you manage to get the samples I requested?"

"I called upon the linen-drapers on Cheapside yesterday," Rose returned cheerfully. She was always glad to see Lady Julia, who had become much more to her than a client. "Please come in." Walking up the front walk to her home, she pulled open the weathered door.

Lady Julia moved past her in a swish of green organdy. Her companion stopped on the old plank-board porch. "I'll wait here if it is all the same to you, miss." His breathtaking grin revealed straight white teeth.

Rose stared, awestruck by his good looks. The door handle slid from her palm, causing the door to slam. She jumped at the noise, her nerve endings crackling.

He pulled the wooden panel back open, blue eyes twinkling.

“Allow me, miss.”

Warmth flooded Rose’s cheeks as she took a step toward the opening. A flush spread to her neck. Taking a breath she inhaled his heady aroma of clover and sage.

“What is your name, miss?”

“Rose Woodcourt.” She glanced at his hand and noticed a signet ring glinting upon his finger. She quickly added, “my lord.”

Of course he was a lord and she a bird-witted fool for reacting so strongly to him. It would best serve her to remember her place in society. Lords did not go about courting common misses. They dallied with them until they grew bored, tossing them aside when the affair no longer held their interest. Rose’s indignation stirred at memories of poor Annie. A rakish earl cast her old friend away after he had gotten her with child. Abandoned and afraid, Annie came to Rose for help. But alas, there was nothing to be done. Annie died bringing forth that odious man’s son.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Woodcourt.” He offered a smile. “I am Hunter Thorne, Earl of Aubry.”

Rose dropped into a low curtsy, holding his gaze. Try as she might, she could not stop looking at him.

A ball of nerves unfurled in her stomach as she accepted his offered hand. A moment later, she pulled her hand free. “Excuse me, Lord Aubry, but Lady Julia is waiting.”

Upon entering her workroom, she found Lady Julia perched on a faded high-back chair. The sweet aroma of fresh bread wafting through the cottage, coupled with the teacup in Lady Julia’s hand, told Rose her grandmother had seen to Lady Julia’s comfort before returning to the kitchen. “Please forgive my disheveled state. I am afraid I lost track of time.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. Shall we?” Lady Julia smiled.

Rose hurried to her shelves and scooped up several bundles of cloth. “Yes, of course. Here are samples for your consideration.” She placed the pile on her sewing table. “The linen-draper assures me these are the newest available. Some came directly from the Orient.”

Rose watched Lady Julia lift a swatch of blue organdy. *The very shade of Lord Aubry’s eyes.* The pair shared the same eye color and shade of hair, the same smile. Were they related? As hope set its hooks in Rose’s heart, she cast away her fancies. She should banish him from her mind lest she wind up like poor Annie. “What a lovely shade, my lady.”

Gran’s voice rang out from the entryway. “I said you shan’t disturb Rose. Mr. Wolfe, you mustn’t go in there.”

Good heavens! That reprobate, Dewitt Wolfe, had darkened her stoop again. Would he never leave her in peace?

“Please excuse me for a moment, Lady Julia.” With her heart thumping, Rose moved to the door. Why wouldn’t he leave her alone? She had broken their betrothal and made her position clear. Yet he refused to accept her decision.

Mr. Wolfe stopped mid-step. Gran came just short of colliding into his backside. “Ah, there you are, my dear.” His mouth twisted into a grin. “I have come to--”

Frustrated beyond reason, Rose forgot she had company. She cut him short, speaking sharper than she intended. “I know why you have come. You need not go on. I have given you my answer.” As she stared into his beady brown eyes, her stomach roiled. “I will not marry you, Mr. Wolfe.”

Flashing a tight smile, Wolfe marched toward her, his dull brown hair disheveled and sticking out from under his tall beaver hat. “You will marry me.” He reached into his pocket and whipped out a folded document. “I had hoped you would not force my hand thusly.” He held the folded parchment out to her, his darkened gaze bored into hers. “The unpaid mortgage to this humble dwelling, my dear. Should you refuse to wed me, I will sell your home out from under you.”

Rose grabbed the document, peeled it open, and scanned the print. Her stomach rolled over, and a knot formed in her throat. She crumpled the parchment in her fist before glaring at him. “You cannot. This is nothing but a trick. Papa paid off the mortgage years ago.”

“I can and I shall.”

Something sinister flickered in his eyes. His stony glare sent a chill through her bloodstream.

“Do not allow this brute to force your hand, Rose,” Gran said, dabbing her eyes. “All will be fine. Even if we lose the cottage, we will find a way.” Gran shook her head, freeing a few strands of graying auburn hair loose from her bun.

Oh, how Rose wished that were so. But the cottage was all she had left of her childhood and her parents, after the carriage accident that claimed their lives. How could Mr. Wolfe gain proof of an unpaid debt that had been settled years ago? She sucked in a breath and squared her shoulders.

“I will prove this is a farce. My answer is still no. I will not marry you. Please leave us in peace.”

When she turned to walk away, he caught her arm, spinning her back to face him.

“The document is legal,” he sneered. “Your dear father never finished paying his debt. I own this cottage due to the breach of this contract.” He stepped closer. “You should be thanking me for saving you from debtors’ prison.”

She jerked her arm free and took a step back from him. Looking up into his cold dark eyes, she mustered all of her courage. "Mr. Wolfe, let me be clear. I will never marry you." Not backing down from his glare, she straightened herself and lifted her chin. "Leave my home at once, Mr. Wolfe." Rose stood her ground and fought her tears. She refused to allow Mr. Wolfe to see how upset he made her.

"I would be happy to do so...as soon as you agree to become my wife."

Lord Aubry stepped up behind him. "I am certain Miss Woodcourt asked you to leave the premises, sir."

His rich voice wrapped around Rose like a warm shawl on an icy night. Her limbs tingled in response, as she swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She could not cry in front of them. She would perish of embarrassment if she did.

Without changing his facial sneer, he bit out his retort. "Who are you to give me orders?" Mr. Wolfe spun to face Lord Aubry. His shoulders slumped as he dropped into a bow. "Forgive me, my lord. I am afraid you came upon a private matter and tempers are high." He straightened before tossing a glance over his shoulder at Rose, his lips pressed into a tight line.

Rose looked at Lord Aubry who stood there with a tight smile, then back at Wolfe. Cold fear trickled through her veins. Wolfe would not take kindly to Lord Aubry's interference.

The earl stepped forward, directly in front of Wolfe, his shoulders squared, his scowl dangerous. "You will show yourself out, this instant."

Rose stared at the men, her cheeks burning. As much as she appreciated his help, she would rather keep her struggles with this unsavory character private.

"Yes, my lord. Right away." Wolfe stepped around Lord Aubry, but not before glowering at her. A moment later the door slammed, shaking the floor beneath Rose's feet. She let out the breath she'd been holding.

"Thank you, Lord Aubry." She dipped into a deep curtsy. Gratitude filled her, but her stomach also knotted. She knew Mr. Wolfe would not give up easily, and Lord Aubry was not likely to be around the next time she found herself in need of saving.

* * * *

Rose clutched the proof in her reticule as she marched toward the constable's office. She had launched a frantic search through Papa's old records last night. Hours were spent sorting through dusty ledgers, until at last she found the slip of parchment she needed. Rose pulled the receipt out and stared at it. Just how Mr. Wolfe managed to forge mortgage papers was beyond her understanding. Well, soon enough,

she would prove Mr. Wolfe to be the fraud she knew he was.

A gentleman in a tall hat rushed past as she reached for the office door. A gust of air created by his movement snatched the precious receipt from her hand. The document danced on the breeze, pausing briefly, then bounced across the walkway. Her pulse quickening, Rose hurried after the receipt. As she stooped to grab her proof, another wind gust snatched the parchment from her fingertips, carrying it away. It landed on the edge of a mud puddle in the center of the busy street. Rose's chest tightened with dread. If the receipt were ruined, she would have nothing to disprove Mr. Wolfe's lies.

Scrambling after the small piece of parchment, she made to grab it, but the wind gave it wings *again*. She paid no mind to the people moving all around her as she dodged between them, desperate to reclaim her proof.

The receipt once again, fluttered down, landing in the very puddle from which Rose had just attempted to save it. Her heart sank. She reached out, fingers brushing the receipt, but pulled back when a carriage rattled by. *No, no, no. This cannot be happening.* If she lost her proof, Rose knew she would also lose the cottage. She edged closer to the curb. As she did, a horse approached with a quick gate. Rose jumped back and watched, as its hooves trampled her hope into the muddy pool.

Dropping to her knees, she reached for the soiled receipt, heedless of her gown. *Please let the writing still be legible.* She leaned over as far as she could, and fished the parchment out of the muddied water. Her heart tumbled to her toes. The ink was smeared beyond recognition. Nothing more than black streaks remained. What was she to do now?

"Miss Woodcourt?" A deep baritone voice invaded her thoughts.

She turned her head, her gaze colliding with Lord Aubry's.

Rose took the hand he offered, allowing him to pull her up. She glanced down at the sopping parchment. "Gone, it is all gone." Her voice shook as she met his questioning gaze.

"What is gone?"

"This! My proof." Frustrated, she dangled the wet, smeared receipt in front of him. Her white gloves were stained with muddy street water from fishing the receipt out of the gutter. Rose struggled to maintain her composure.

"I am afraid I do not follow, Miss Woodcourt." Concern flashed in his blue eyes.

Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders, determined to stay calm. "It was the receipt proving Papa had indeed paid off the mortgage he owed Mr. Wolfe's father. I intended to take the proof to the constable. Now I have nothing." Rose fought rising panic, her free hand fisting her skirt.

“You might still hire the Bow Street Runners to investigate.” He studied her, his gaze softened.

Something in the way he searched her face warmed her deep inside. “That is not an option. I must go, my lord.” She dipped into a curtsy.

He caught her elbow and pulled her to her feet. “Pray tell, why is hiring a Bow Street runner not an option?” Rose could not ignore the small butterflies taking flight in her belly at his touch.

She peered up into his sky-blue gaze and nibbled her lip. How could she admit to him that hiring them was beyond her financial reach? Without proof they could not simply right the wrong. Perhaps Wolfe could be arrested. No. She would have to hand over coin, and plenty of it, for an investigation. She had no extra coin. No matter how she tried to think to answer him, she simply couldn’t respond. She stood mute, gazing at him.

“Do you intend to ignore me?” Frustration coated Lord Aubry’s words. He released his grip on her.

Rose glanced up at him. *Could he help?* She wanted to ask, but made no move to speak.

“If you tell me what the issue is perhaps I may be able to assist you.” His eyes were locked on hers. His voice was gentle. An odd sensation unfurled in her midsection.

Rose averted her gaze, not entirely sure she wished to share her struggles with him.

“Very well,” he said. “Keep your secrets for now, if you must.”

“I cannot afford an investigation at this time, and I do not desire your assistance.” Her cheeks flamed at the admission. “I could not possibly impose.” Her insides felt so strange. Why did he affect her so?

“There is no imposition. In fact, I insist.” Grinning, he extended his arm. His day coat clung to his chest, revealing a muscular physique.

“That is most generous, but I cannot allow it.” Rose forced a smile.

Pity flickered in his eyes as he held her gaze.

How mortifying. A flush spread from her chest up her neck. The last thing she wanted was to become his charity case.

“At the least, allow me to take you home,” he offered.

She flashed a smile and turned, intending to take her leave. “I can see myself home. Thank you.”

Taking her elbow, he turned her to face him. “Nonsense. There is no reason for you to hire a hackney when I have a perfectly good carriage right here.” He gestured toward the same impressive coach that had delivered Lady Julia to her door the previous day.

Rose nibbled her lower lip in thought. The pair shared the same surname, but how were they related? Could they be siblings or cousins, perchance? Regardless, Lady Julia was fond of him. Perhaps

not all lords were as odious as Annie's earl had been. Surely, she would not come to harm simply by allowing him to drive her home. "Very well." She sighed.

Her thrill of longing went through her when she wrapped her hand under his upper arm. She was certain the reaction had nothing to do with her current predicament. *Stop you ninny, he is a lord. Lords do not court untitled misses.* Mayhap if she told herself that enough she would get him out of her mind.

Lord Aubry waved off his driver. Instead, he opened the door to his coach and pulled down a tiny step for her to use. Holding her firmly, he assisted her up into the black lacquer barouche, his crest emblazoned on the door. Her skirt rustled as she sat down on the overstuffed leather seat. She had never been inside such a fine conveyance.

The lopsided grin he offered set her heart aflutter. She smiled back before averting her gaze. It would not do for him to see how deeply he affected her. Besides, her thinking became muddled while looking at him. She needed to focus on the problem of Mr. Wolfe. There had to be a way to stop him, without sending her to the poorhouse. *There simply had to be.*

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About the Author

Bestselling, Amazon All Star author Amanda Mariel dreams of days gone by when life moved at a slower pace. She enjoys taking pen to paper and exploring historical time periods through her imagination and the written word. When she is not writing she can be found reading, crocheting, traveling, practicing her photography skills, or spending time with her family.

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Untitled

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The Rogue's Seduction

Lauren Smith

*For my grandmother, Rhea, who always had a secret stash of bodice
rippers for me to read.*

Chapter 1

London, December 1821

Perdita Darby tugged the hood of her cloak close about her face, shielding herself not just from the bitter wind that battered the hackney coach she'd hired, but from any watchful eyes lurking in the shadows. The street was empty, twilight and the cold having chased even the most dedicated late-night strollers to their homes. Even the street urchins, usually desperate for coin, were tucked away in their alleyways on a biting cold night such as this, seeking what warmth they could. Perdita feared the darkness might hide someone who would realize who she was or what she was going to do. That could spell ruin.

"M'lady?" The driver of the hired coach stood by the door and closed it as she tugged her skirts free. He began to doff his cap at her, but she waved for him to keep it on. The night was too cold for such things. He smiled gratefully and kicked the snow off his boots.

"Please wait for me here." She pressed a few coins in his palm, and he nodded.

"Of course." The driver pocketed the coins and climbed back up onto his seat. He bundled his heavy brown cloak over his body and huddled down for warmth.

Perdita faced the door of the townhouse in front of her. It was a lovely home, one that had been on Duke Street for many years. The noble arches were framed with ivy that grew up from the flower beds bordering the windows, even though the leaves had dropped away to expose the skeletal webbing of vines beneath. But in spring when the ivy was bright and sprawling, it would make this house look almost like a cottage deep in the Cotswolds, not a stately townhouse in the midst of a bustling city.

It was clear the owner of this house didn't bother with a gardener

who would have kept the ivy from spreading. But that shouldn't have surprised her. She knew the owner of this house. Perdita planned to throw herself at his feet and beg for his help if she had to, and it didn't matter if ballroom whispers called him the Devil of London.

She squared her shoulders.

Be brave. He's the only one who can help you. Don't let him know how frightened you are.

She marched up the steps and rapped the metal knocker mounted on the stout oak door. Suddenly doubt assailed her. This was a terrible idea. Her mind screamed at her to flee as she stood upon the threshold to the underworld.

Perhaps she could beg her parents to let her go to the continent for a few years and avoid the fate that had driven her to this door at such an hour. Yet that would only spare her, not her family, of the consequences of running away from the blackmail she was facing.

The door creaked, the old oak protesting as the hinges grudgingly gave in. A middle-aged butler stood there, his beady eyes peering down at her over his long, thin nose and pointed chin. His professional demeanor lacked the politeness expected of a servant in a decent household. His shoulders were broad, and he seemed far too muscular for a refined position of a butler. But this wasn't a decent household. This was the devil's own home.

"Er..." He blinked at her, apparently startled by her appearance. It was a risk to be seen standing on this particular doorstep after midnight, a fact of which she was all too aware.

"I must see Lord Darlington at once," she told the man, praying he would let her inside. She could not take the risk of being seen and starting a scandal. Or rather, a different scandal than the one she was meticulously planning already.

The man hesitated, his body barring her entrance through the still partially closed door. "This is late, even for my master."

Perdita didn't back down. "I am aware of the hour, but he will want to see me." She raised her chin and announced this with such regal bearing that he would not dare question her. He sighed and stepped away from the doorway. Her mother's lessons, it seemed, hadn't been wasted on her after all.

"This way, madam." He waved a hand for her to step inside. She entered the townhouse, her body relaxing, but only just. She may have been out of view of the street, but she was still in very dangerous territory.

Two dim lamps illuminated the hall and staircase. She was surprised they were still lit. Was the master of the house still awake? She had assumed he would be, but the house was hushed and ghostly quiet. She took a moment to study her surroundings with open

curiosity. The foyer was bare of any decorations, paintings, or even end tables. The starkness of it surprised her.

So this is where the Devil of London resides.

The furniture she glimpsed through a cracked-open door a few feet away—the drawing room perhaps—was outdated and threadbare. It made sense. The master of this house was rumored to be a desperate fortune hunter in dire straits. His desperation was no fault of his own, but rather due to his parents' untimely deaths and their accumulated debts.

It had to be a heavy burden to enter adulthood with the responsibilities of maintaining title and lands held in one's own family without any money by which to do so. Any man in such a position was a *dangerous* man—particularly when it came to rich, unmarried heiresses.

Like me...

"Please wait while I speak to the master. Who shall I say is calling?" the butler asked.

"Perdita Darby," she said, trying to still her trembling as she watched the butler go upstairs.

Perdita swallowed the knot of fear in her throat. This man had been desperate enough to kidnap her dearest friend, Alexandra Rockford, in order to win a five-thousand-pound wager by seducing her. That alone earned him his nickname in her eyes. To treat a woman's virtue as something to be wagered on! In the end, however, he had failed. Alexandra had been rescued by Ambrose Worthing, a man so in love with her he had fought his best friend to free her.

Alexandra had assured Perdita that Lord Darlington hadn't been *entirely* wicked—he'd only planned to convince the men involved in the wager that he had bedded her when he had not. But that did not make the Devil of London a hero, by any means. At best, he was a villain with a conscience. But Perdita was desperate enough to risk herself in his house tonight, knowing the danger and scandal that could fall upon her.

This is a terrible idea. Unfortunately, she had no other option. Only Lord Darlington could help her. She was prepared to do just about anything to escape her situation.

"Madam." The butler appeared at the top of the stairs. "His Lordship will see you now."

Perdita stared up at him, startled. "Upstairs? Not the drawing room?"

The old codger had the audacity to grin at her. "He insisted you meet upstairs, or I was to show you out."

The nerve of the man, demanding she meet him upstairs! Did he treat all gentle-bred ladies like this? Or, knowing who was paying a

call upon him, he was perhaps doing his best to frighten her off. Yes, that must be it. He thought she would be too afraid to go upstairs.

I'm not afraid. Well, I am, but I'll be damned if I let him know that.

She lifted her skirts and ascended the stairs, her heart hammering. She followed the butler to a room where the door was slightly ajar. She glanced at the servant, but he was already departing.

Perdita pushed the door open and froze when she realized it was a bedchamber. Darlington had the audacity to call her to his *bedchamber*? Did he believe she had come for amorous reasons, or that she would condone such a brazen attempt at seduction? It was entirely possible, given the scandalous hour and the fact she was without a chaperone, but she would set him straight if he dared to try to seduce her.

She wished for the hundredth time it would have been possible to visit him during the day, but there had been no alternative. People would have seen her enter his home, and that would be the end of her carefully kept reputation. She tensed when a dark, rich voice spoke.

Vaughn Darlington, the viscount dubbed by *ton* as the Devil of London. His voice sent tingles of excitement and fear through her. She took an instinctive step back toward the door.

“Fleeing so soon? I would have wagered you were braver than that, Miss Darby. Or perhaps, given the lateness of the hour and the method of this meeting, I should call you Perdita?”

She bristled and pushed the hood of her cloak back to better peer around the room. There was a four-poster bed against one wall and a fire crackling in the hearth. The wood floor showed dusty outlines of where carpets had recently been. The dark-green brocaded curtains about the bed were faded, and a few rings were missing, letting the fabric gape in odd places. Worn and peeling silk wallpapers depicting men hunting in the forest covered the walls. A once beautiful wardrobe stood in one corner, a door missing. The shaving stand held a white china basin with a large crack down its side.

The masculine air of the room was overpowering, just as the man himself was, but the circumstances and the condition of his rooms filled her with a strange pity that made her go still as she turned her focus on the man himself.

Leaning against one worn, ancient chair was Lord Darlington. He was tall, broad shouldered, and had a dangerous look about his all too beautiful face. With piercing blue eyes and light-blond hair, Darlington could have passed for an angel if it weren't for the sensual, wicked curve of his lips. He wore buff trousers and a white lawn shirt, with a dark-blue waistcoat. His cravat had been untied and lay loose over the back of one chair.

Perdita's heart quickened. She had never stood in a room with a

man in a state of partial undress like this. She forced herself to rally to the task at hand.

“Lord Darlington, I come here with a proposal.” Her tone was brusque with a manner of business about it. This was not about seduction, no matter how sinful he made her feel. Though she’d rehearsed this speech a dozen times on her own, she had not been prepared for the strange and frightening feelings that assaulted her now as she spoke to him alone.

He crossed his arms as he studied her with that wicked twist of his lips, making her breath quicken. She shifted in place, and her boots scraped softly against the wood floor.

“Do go on.” He chuckled, seeming to enjoy her discomfort.

“Well, you see...” She spoke haltingly, still mortified that she was here begging him for his help. “I need to stop an unwanted marriage proposal.” She twined her fingers nervously as she removed her gloves. “My mother has convinced a certain gentleman that I am willing to consider his offer, when I most certainly am not.”

She tried not to think of Mr. Samuel Milburn and how that man had made it clear he would imprison her in a life that would slowly kill her. She could still see him leaning in close to her and whispering: *“The women I care for know better than to seek the company of others, when I should be enough. My home has all you will need, so I will hear no talk of travel or nights out. They would only distract you from your duty, which would be pleasing me.”*

He was a brute and a tyrant and worse, but Perdita’s mother, despite her ambitious nature, didn’t usually believe in society gossip.

Perdita did. She’d heard that Milburn had thrown a woman to her death from a window, but because the woman was his mistress, no questions were asked. It had been dismissed as an unfortunate accident. All Perdita knew for sure was that this man was a monster. She had tried to tell her father and mother what she’d heard, but her words had been dismissed as idle talk. If her older brother Thomas hadn’t been away at sea serving in His Majesty’s royal navy, she would have sought his help.

In Perdita’s experience, being a wealthy heiress was a terrible burden. It put a mark on her. She’d fought off fortune hunters for the last few years, but a man like Milburn was dangerous in other ways. He didn’t care about her money—he cared about breaking her spirit and possibly even killing her if she didn’t give him what he desired. She was *sport*.

She’d made the mistake of meeting him at a dinner party last fall, and he had immediately shown an interest in her once he’d learned she was none other than Miss Darby, the beloved lady of the *ton* who all sought to please with their praise and their many invitations.

Perdita had not wished to cultivate such a favored reputation on purpose, but it had happened quite naturally. But to Milburn she became a prize he wished to win—and then suffocate and destroy. Once he had her in his sights, he had been able to contrive a scheme that could destroy her family and blackmail her into accepting his proposal.

“What does this have to do with me? Or did you merely wish to tumble in my sheets to avoid marrying some silly young buck? I don’t care much for ruining innocents, but in your case I might make an exception,” Darlington said, his sharp gaze on her.

Perdita considered reminding him he had in fact attempted to ruin her innocent friend over a wager, but she thought better of it. Quarreling with him now would not aid her in acquiring his help.

“I wish to engage your services.” She still couldn’t say the words. It was too humiliating.

“My services?” He shifted slightly, a frown curving his lips. “What *services* do you require?” When Darlington said *services*, it sounded sinful, wicked.

“I wish to hire your cooperation in appearing to be engaged to me, publicly. Not a true engagement, just for a few months, to deter the other gentleman so he will leave me be.” She glanced down, playing with her gloves. She was betting that Milburn would lose interest if he believed he had another challenger for her hand.

His eyes turned wintry, almost chilling as they settled on her fidgeting hands. “So I’m to play your fiancé? What’s to be my reward in scaring the bounder off?” Darlington still leaned against the side of the chair, but Perdita was more aware of him than ever. The small distance between them seemed to shrink every second.

“I will pay you. I have access to some of my dowry. It is invested in a private bank with Lady Rosalind Lennox. My father put the funds in his name, but he allows me to have some control over them.”

Darlington stroked his chin. “I require a more permanent solution than a temporary flow of money. You said you bank with Lady Lennox?” He continued to stare at her with that assessing gaze, and she suddenly feared he might not agree, that he might consider blackmailing her directly for her funds in the bank by exposing her visit to his townhouse. Surely he wouldn’t dare.

When he still gazed at her expectantly, she realized he awaited some response to his question. She nodded.

“Then you are acquainted with Lord Lennox, her husband? He is a selective but successful investor. I wish to be involved in whatever scheme he chooses to invest in next.”

Perdita nodded again. She was well acquainted with Rosalind Lennox, but she only knew of her husband, Ashton Lennox, in passing.

Perhaps she could persuade Rosalind to allow Darlington to invest with her husband. She only hoped such a request wouldn't seem inappropriate to her friend. It was a risk she had to take to avoid marriage to a man like Samuel Milburn.

"I believe I can arrange a meeting. As to whether he allows you to invest..." There was no way she could guarantee that.

Darlington pushed away from the chair and came up to her. The simple action seemed to change everything between them. Before he hadn't seemed so threatening. But now with his towering frame so close, she felt very much like a tiny rabbit facing a very large wolf. She knew he was tall, but standing inches away from him made her feel small and feminine in a way she never had before. It took a moment for her to catch her breath. She had to tilt her face back to look up at him.

"I suppose that would be good enough. But you know once we have begun this charade, everyone will expect us to marry." It sounded like he was warning her. They would never marry. If there was one thing she was certain of, she would *not* marry the Devil of London.

"I am aware of that. After a time I deem prudent, you may cry off our engagement and go on as you please." She had to be completely sure Samuel Milburn was no longer interested in her, and only then could she risk a public break with Lord Darlington. Otherwise, her family's reputation would be ruined, and her father might be facing penalties under English law.

His lips twitched in an amused smile. "And you are ready to brave the *ton* after being jilted by me?" The wolfish smile that stole across his lips was not reassuring. "I doubt any other man would have you once I've been your lover."

"We would not be lovers, only engaged."

Darlington laughed softly. "Any woman I asked to marry me would certainly be my lover beforehand. I wouldn't wish to marry a woman unless I was positive I enjoyed my time with her in bed."

She ignored his scandalous words. "Being jilted by the likes of you, even if some assume we've been lovers, is better than having a man like Samuel Milburn find a way to compromise me. I know the sort of man he is, and as unbelievable as it is, he is *worse* than you." She threw her shoulders back and glared at him, daring him to argue the point.

"Milburn?" Darlington's eyes widened. "That's the man who is chasing your skirts?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

He nodded slowly. "Unfortunately, I do. We've run into each other at various clubs." He paused as though choosing his words carefully,

weighing what she ought to hear or not as the case might be. "Most of the *ton* see him as a delightful gentleman who could do no wrong. Others know him as I do. Some would say he and I have similar tastes in pain—not in receiving it but causing it."

"A taste for pain?" Perdita shuddered. She'd heard Milburn had thrown his mistress out of a window. Any future with a man like that would seal her fate, but she hadn't heard the same of Darlington. He wasn't cruel, though she'd heard he was impossibly *wicked*. Even a fleeting kiss upon the hand during an introduction had been known to cause such scandals that ladies in the ballroom took flight to escape, like a flock of birds dressed in silk and tulle.

"Yes." Darlington's eyes were on her face again. "We require something a little different in our bed play." He paused again, his eyes dark and fathomless as he stared at her. "But unlike him, my goal is *always* pleasure. A crying, hurting woman is not arousing to me. But for Milburn, it makes his blood turn to fire."

Darlington's bold words on such a subject made her take another step back.

"You like to cause *pain* in bed?" She hated how her words trembled as they escaped her. Surely whispers of this would have reached her if that were true. "This was a mistake. I should—"

He reached up and cupped her cheek when she tried to pull away, then wound a strong arm around her waist, her cloak bunching above her bottom. She had to face him now and hear whatever it was he wished to say.

"There are two types of pain, love. One is slight, expected, and leads to intense pleasure. The other is selfish and part of a need to be cruel and harsh. I prefer the former, not the latter."

His words didn't make any sense. Pain was pain, wasn't it? She wrinkled her nose and prepared to argue this, but she never had the chance. He lowered his head and captured her mouth with his. Perdita was frozen in shock. The feel of his soft warm lips moving over hers was strange but increasingly delightful.

She'd never been kissed before but had often imagined how it would feel. She mimicked his mouth and gasped as he licked the seam of her lips with his tongue. The velvety feel of his tongue touching her lips was both sinful and decadent. Her knees went weak beneath her heavy skirts. She grasped his shoulders, frantic not to lose hold of him. The heat between their mouths intensified, and a heady dazed feeling began to slink through her limbs and into her lower belly. She could do this for hours...

His lips wandered from hers down to her throat just above where her cloak covered her shoulders. He placed a kiss there and then suddenly nipped her skin with his teeth. The bite sent a jolt through

her, and a fierce, shocking pulse beat between her thighs. She whimpered and tried to push away, not because it hurt, but because the rush of sensations had been too much. She'd never—

"That, my love, is pain mixed with pleasure." Darlington whispered this against the skin of her throat, still holding her fast so she could not escape. Shivers rippled down her spine, and she closed her eyes. This was frightening. *He* was frightening, but a part of her wanted to understand more of what he was showing her.

From the moment she'd first seen him at her mother's garden party a few months before, she'd been intrigued by his mysteries. She wouldn't deny it. Any decent young lady would not have allowed herself to be fascinated by such a notorious rogue, but now more than ever she wondered if perhaps she wasn't as decent as she ought to be.

Darlington slowly released her waist, but the hand that still held her face seemed to burn her skin. He brushed his thumb over her lips, leaving a tingling sensation that trailed from her mouth down to her toes. She raised her eyes to his, her world tilting on its axis as she stared up at him. There was no going back from that kiss. She'd taken a bite of the forbidden apple, and the juices were sweet upon her lips.

"You're still trembling," he observed, his voice was low and gentle, but rather than soothe her, she felt excited by it.

"It is always like that?" she asked, wondering why Mother had never mentioned that lips could meet in such a blaze of fire when she'd discussed the ways men and women could be together.

Darlington touched her lips once more before dropping his hands. "Not always. Too many marriages are built upon the wrong foundations, and passions are rarely taken into account." He turned away from her and walked over to the fire, placing one hand on the mantle as he gazed into the flames.

"If you want to play this game, Miss Darby, it must be played convincingly. Milburn won't accept a mere declaration of our engagement. He knows me too well. He's also not the sort to give up easily." Darlington's face was lit by firelight. For a moment, he looked more like Hades, the Greek god of the underworld, than a mere London rogue. Perdita was entranced by the sight of him. He was a lure she couldn't resist. How many women had come into his room before her and fallen under his spell?

"What did you have in mind?"

"I suppose you recall what befell Alexandra Rockford in my home? A public display. *That* is what I mean. Milburn will need to see us in a compromising position." He turned to face her. "And that means more than a simple kiss."

Perdita bit her bottom lip. A simple kiss? Not to her. That kiss had been her undoing. She was wise enough to know he had changed her

life in a few short minutes.

"If it helps me escape Samuel Milburn, then I agree to do whatever is necessary." She raised her chin, earning a slow smile from him that made her blush.

"What?" she demanded as he continued to smile at her.

"I never would've guessed you would agree. Of all ladies, you seem to be the most..."

Perdita narrowed her eyes. "Most what?"

"Let us say I'm surprised at your defiant streak, that is all."

Perdita stared at him challengingly. "I behave appropriately in public, a dutiful daughter and a well-bred lady, but you have no idea what sort of woman I really am." He truly didn't. She was a lady, well-versed in conversation, a charming hostess, a delight among the *ton*, but that wasn't all she was. There were other, hidden sides of herself she dared not reveal.

Darlington's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Now *that* is most interesting. As your fiancé, I will make it my sacred duty to uncover these hidden facets of your character."

She tilted her head, studying him in return. "How about your services then?" She wanted to keep this matter as businesslike between them as she could manage. He would no doubt rob her of her good sense with his kisses, but if she held fast and reminded them both this was only business and nothing more, then perhaps she might survive this devil's bargain with her heart intact.

"I have one last question before I agree, and I demand honesty in your answer."

She weighed the risk of losing his help against any question he might demand and then nodded. "Ask."

"What hold does Milburn have over you that leaves you in such fear? I do not believe for a moment that your parents would force you to accept a match with him even if he dragged you down with scandal. No, there is something that makes you fear you might have no choice to accept if he pursues you." Darlington played with the cuffs of his right-hand sleeve. "What does he hold over you, Miss Darby?"

It was the one question she didn't want to answer, but she knew she had to.

"In private, he has claimed that he can prove my father was involved in the smuggling of goods into England and evading taxes." She hesitated, hoping she could trust Darlington with such information.

"And is he? Guilty, I mean?"

"No! I mean, that is to say, *he* isn't. But I fear the men he invests with might very well be guilty. I believe Milburn might even be

working with them to frame my father, and unfortunately I have no way of stopping them. If I marry him, he says he will destroy the evidence, but if I do not..."

"And you believe that an engagement to me will stop him?"

"It has to," she whispered. "If he no longer desires me, then he has no reason to go through with his threats. And you are one of the most wicked men in London. If he isn't afraid of you and tries to take what is yours, such as a future wife, he would be mad."

The corners of lips twitched. "That is certainly true. I wouldn't hesitate to destroy any who dared take what is mine, especially a woman. Very well, I agree to this scheme, mad though it is." Darlington held out one hand to her. "Shall we shake upon it?" He was quite serious, except for the wicked gleam in his eyes. A gleam that promised every moment with him would be deliciously sinful torture.

Perdita placed her palm in his. "We have an accord."

"Agreed." He turned her hand in his, lifting it to his lips as he kissed her knuckles.

"Good." She hesitated, relishing the feel of his lips upon her bare fingers before she tugged her hand free of his. "My mother is hosting a Christmas party at our estate in Lothbrook. I will see to it that you are invited. Please bring your valet, and have him pack enough clothes to last through Christmas."

Darlington nodded, but when she turned to leave, he caught her arm.

"Yes? Lord Darlington?" She eyed his hand on her arm. He did not release her, not like another man would.

"Given our new intimacy, it would please me to be called Vaughn whenever we are alone."

"Vaughn." She tested the sound of his given name, hating that she liked how smoothly it rolled off her tongue.

"And I expect to be introduced to Lord and Lady Lennox before the end of this year. Will that be possible?"

Perdita nodded. "Yes. I will arrange it as soon as I can."

"Good." He tucked her arm in his. "Let me escort you out."

"Really, my lord—Vaughn. There's no need."

"I need to practice playing the part of a gentleman. I fear I may be a bit rusty."

She remained silent as he led her down the stairs. When he opened the front door, she paused as the bitter wind cut through her. She glanced at him a moment longer before she pulled her cloak hood back up, concealing her features. She rushed to the waiting coach and climbed inside. She chanced one last peek at him through the curtains. He stood there in the doorway without a coat. She remembered the

heat of his body pressed to hers and shivered, but not from the cold.

How strange to have made a bargain with Vaughn, Viscount Darlington. They were now bound together, and though they were united in their mission, she felt incredibly alone. She wished she could talk to her dear friend Alexandra, but she was the last person Perdita could confide in when it came to Vaughn.

When Vaughn had kidnapped Alex, it had been a terrifying ordeal, even after Vaughn had revealed he had no intention of harming her. When Alex learned of her supposed engagement to Vaughn, she would no doubt rush to Perdita and try to put a stop to her madness. It was not a meeting Perdita looked forward to, but she and Alex had such different views on how to handle society. Alex had hidden from it while Perdita had embraced it.

Perdita needed Vaughn's dangerous reputation. It was the last shield she had against Samuel Milburn. It was something her dear friend would not understand because she was not the target of Milburn's evil intent. Perdita had sold her soul to a lesser devil to protect herself from a worse one.

She prayed only that their scheme would work, or she was doomed.

Chapter 2

Vaughn Darlington watched the coach vanish into the wintry night, his smile fading as the distance between him and Perdita Darby grew. He was a tad melancholy after the whirlwind of the last half hour. Part of him was still amused by the little beauty—her tenacity, her courage, even her recklessness in approaching someone with his reputation in his bedchamber. At midnight, no less.

A proposition, she'd said. And what a proposition it had been. The run of bad luck that had burdened him for so long seemed to be taking a turn for the better, and all because of a little country girl with sound intuition when it came to the darker side of Samuel Milburn.

His smile grew grim. She thought his announced interest in her would put off Milburn, but Vaughn knew Milburn better than she did. Whatever intentions Vaughn had for her, as his mistress or his betrothed, her scheme would not likely matter to a man like Milburn. He was a true bastard, a danger to the fairer sex, and would find a way to claim what he thought was rightfully his.

Yet Vaughn hadn't been able to tell her that whatever he did with her would not be enough to stop Milburn. Not on its own. Vaughn could only hope their little charade would give him a chance to stop whatever Milburn was planning.

He considered the larger problem. Leverage. That was what Milburn had. So long as he held this evidence regarding Miss Darby's father, if it even existed, he would be in a position to pressure and cajole her. First, he would demand she break off her engagement, then bide his time before he held her feet to the fire to accept his own proposal. That sounded like the bastard's style. But without that evidence, his position would crumble.

He would put his butler on it. Craig was far more than he appeared to be, and he had not always been a butler. He had his ways of making men tell the truth. If anyone could get to the bottom of this, it was him.

His thoughts turned back to Perdita and her reaction to the nip he gave her shoulder. While Vaughn was quite notorious for his penchant for pain mixed with pleasure in bed play, he never harmed his bed partners. Milburn, however, had killed his last mistress, or so it was said. The rumors had been murmured in the seediest clubs, and once Vaughn heard he'd been disgusted with the man. Without proof, there wasn't enough to take the case to court. Milburn, as a gentleman, would escape prosecution.

The affair left a sour taste in Vaughn's mouth, which was why he'd agreed to help Perdita. He knew Milburn and his type. The man would stop at nothing until he was married to her, and then the law would do nothing once her new husband revealed his cruel streak.

Perdita was in danger, and the only way to remedy that was to offer her the ultimate protection—his name given in marriage. It was the reason he had taken so long to give her an answer. She had no idea that what she really needed was a true wedding, not a false engagement. And ordinarily, he would have declined.

But something about Perdita had changed his mind. It had happened ever so subtly over the course of their interaction. The way she'd softened in his arms when he'd kissed her. The way she'd challenged him when he'd reminded her of what her reputation would be like at the end of her charade. The way she was a charming and yet innocent country maiden who responded with fire and bravado. She'd intrigued him even as she'd stormed into his bedchamber, where there was no chaperone to save her from his clutches. None of it had been an act. Perdita was a woman worth knowing, a woman with secrets and passions and a mind all her own. *That* was a woman he could marry.

A smile crept back onto his face, and this time it was one of hesitant joy.

Vaughn walked into the drawing room and approached the tray of drinks his butler had set out earlier. He poured himself a glass of brandy before he took a seat in the chair by the fire just starting to turn to embers. He sipped his drink, savoring the flavor as he contemplated the unique opportunity Perdita had presented him with tonight.

It had been so long since he had looked forward to anything. Ever since his parents had died five years past, he'd been mired in debts that were too deep to recover from on his own. No matter what he did, he seemed to be damned. He'd had to close his country estate, let go of his entire staff save for one caretaker, and reduce the staff at his London townhouse.

His only way of getting by had been to win wagers at the clubs, and even that source was running dry. Every man in every major club

now knew better than to wager large stakes when they found him across the gaming table. His ability to win should have helped pay off his family's debts, but not even the most gullible lads were foolish enough to stake their fortunes against him now.

He'd become known as the Devil of London in a matter of months. The moniker hadn't upset him as much as he thought it would at first, but it had kept men from playing even a simple game of cards with him. His friends certainly didn't approve of his actions, and in the last few years most had abandoned him.

Of course, he'd done other things, worse things, to drive his friends away. In the fall he had approached White's infamous betting book and found a five-thousand-pound sum wagered for publicly seducing a young woman named Alexandra Rockford, Perdita's close friend.

Kidnapping was not at all a charming prospect to him, unless of course the lady *wished* to be kidnapped. He'd played that particular game more than a few times with delightful results, but kidnapping Alexandra had been...*dreadful*.

He indulged in a moment of self-loathing. The night he had taken Alexandra to his home to fake her ruination for the sake of a wager had left a dark stain. He hated himself far more than he ever had before, and it showed how desperate he had truly become. That loathing had deepened until it left a scar on his heart. One he doubted would ever go away.

When he found Perdita in his doorway tonight, he hadn't expected to feel anything. Yet he had. She'd lowered her hood, and her brown hair had turned a burnished bronze in the lamplight. Her eyes, a gentle shade of brown like topaz stones, turned warm as honey. His blood had burned with desire in a way it hadn't in a long while. If that wasn't reason enough to marry the girl, he wasn't sure what else would be.

He left the drawing room and sought out his butler. He found the older man in his office on the basement of the townhouse.

"Mr. Craig, I have a task for you."

The butler glanced up from the papers on his desk. He gave Vaughn an appraising look. "Am I correct in assuming that this lies outside my usual duties?"

"You are."

Mr. Craig sighed. "I am no longer a young man, my lord."

"This is not for my own selfish desires, Mr. Craig. That young woman you brought to me requires our help. Her very life may depend on it."

Those words seemed to give Mr. Craig new vigor. He rose to his feet like a man twenty years younger. "Name it, my lord."

"A man named Samuel Milburn claims to have evidence that Mr.

Reginald Darby has been involved in smuggling and evading taxes. He's using this as a means to pressure Darby's daughter into accepting marriage to him."

Mr. Craig scowled. Though he did not look it, he was at heart a romantic. In fact, Vaughn had caught him reading the works of L. R. Gloucester, a gothic novelist, on more than one occasion. The thought of any man forcing a woman by such means would be anathema to him.

"I want you to look into this. Miss Darby believes her father invested with men who might be working with Milburn. It could be they are trying to lay false evidence that Darby is the one behind the ill deeds. What we need is proof that Milburn is attempting to blackmail the Darby family, or proof of Mr. Darby's innocence. And if at all possible, I want you to put a stop to whoever is causing these problems, if you understand my meaning."

Mr. Craig's grim smile was a reminder of the man he'd once been, a man who'd fought valiantly for his country in the shadowy years before.

"Understood."

He rarely spoke of those times, and when he did it was often in an allegorical fashion, but Vaughn had seen on more than one occasion just what Mr. Craig was capable of. And despite his complaints of old age and weariness, it took little to light the old fire under him again.

He left his butler and called for his valet, knowing the fellow would be up late.

"Barnaby!" His voice echoed in the darkened corridor. A few seconds later the man appeared around the edge of the door leading to the servants' quarters.

"My lord?"

"Pack me a valise for at least a week. We're going to Lothbrook in a few days and shall be there for Christmas." He tipped his brandy back and finished it before he headed for the stairs to return to his bedchamber.

Barnaby wrinkled his nose. "Lothbrook again? I'm still scraping the dust out of your trousers from the last visit, my lord." The man muttered this more to himself than to his master. Neither of them cared much for the country. It was so bloody provincial, but if he had to return there to seduce his unknowing bride, then that was where he must go.

He would deal with the details of his travel arrangements in the morning once he had had word from Perdita's parents that he was invited to their estate. With another small smile, he returned to his bedchamber and began to strip down for bed. He always slept in the buff, even in winter. It was a habit that would no doubt shock his

little bride-to-be, but he suspected she would shock him right back. He closed his eyes, letting his mind flash images of her as he bent to kiss her, and the memory of it resurrected a smile upon his lips.

Her startled look, then the way she'd melted in his arms. She'd tasted like honey and fire, burning, yet impossibly sweet. He could still feel the velvet of her cloak, crumpled in his hands as he latched on to her. He had wanted to slide his hand up her skirts right then, but that would've been a step too far, no matter how she'd claimed she was not an innocent creature.

She was wanton, he would agree, yet still innocent in so many ways. Introducing Perdita to the mysteries of a man and woman coming together was not a thing to be rushed. Hasty fumbblings in the dark would not do. No, she deserved a well-planned, deliciously slow seduction of the body and the mind.

Vaughn sat on the edge of his bed, raking his hands through his hair as he considered his next move. Tomorrow he needed to purchase a ring. He had little money to do so, but he'd find a way. His smile stretched into a broad grin. The invisible forces of fate had seemed determined to stop him from restoring his family's name in the *ton*, and now he had found a way to win against them: marry the *ton*'s darling. Miss Darby was the answer to his prayers. What a shock it would be to them all.

London's sweetest lady mated to its fiercest devil.



Perdita stood by her mother's writing desk in her private sitting room, her heart racing more than it ought. Her mother sat at her delicate escritoire and was diligently checking the guest list for the party that would occupy their country estate in a few days. Perdita shifted about, her red shawl dropping from her shoulders to hang about her elbows and lower back.

"Perdita dear, you're lingering. You know how much I detest lingering. Either come and speak to me or be off."

Smoothing the skirts of her pale-rose gown, Perdita approached her mother and cleared her throat.

"I should like to add a guest to the list, Mama, if you don't mind. I know we have extra rooms." The estate was an ancient one that, while lacking the pomp of a peerage family with a title, was still a rival to many of the aristocratic homes in the country. It boasted no less than

twenty bedrooms, a ballroom, and a music room. Perdita had numerous unpleasant memories of plucking away at a harp during an arranged musicale performance when she debuted two years ago.

Her mother glanced up, wisps of brown hair threaded with silver creeping out from her turban. "Oh? And who do you wish me to invite?"

Perdita straightened herself. "My fiancé."

The quill in her mother's hand seemed to hover a moment in midair before it clattered flat on the writing desk, splattering ink on the corner of the list her mother had been writing.

"Your..."

"Fiancé. Yes."

Her mother's eyes were as large as saucers. "So you accepted Mr. Milburn, then?"

"Er...no. It is someone else."

"What? But who?"

Perdita understood her mother's shock. It had been two long years since her debut, and she had rejected all offers that first year. The second season she had not received any offers. Rather than become a spinster, she'd cultivated her reputation as a young lady of good character. Debutantes came to her for advice, society mamas sought the name of her modiste, and gentlemen sought her for conversations.

She was well versed to play the role set out for her. Charming and delightful, she was welcome in every London household. The one thing she had *not* done was allow herself to be courted. The men of England had given up, until Samuel Milburn met her a few months ago at a dinner party.

Their encounter had been brief, pointedly cool, at least from Perdita's side. Milburn had taken her cool aloofness in stride and informed her parents the following day of his intentions. Once Perdita learned of this, she'd come up with her desperate plan and had been biding her time until she felt safe enough to go to Vaughn.

"It's Lord Darlington, Mama. He and I have been seeing each other in secret. I know you disapprove of such things, but we wanted to be sure of our affections before we let society pry into our affairs."

Her mother's eyes nearly bulged out of her head. "Darlington? But... Good heavens, what about Milburn? I can't rescind his invitation for Christmas. He was most excited to come shooting with your father."

"I know..." Perdita pretended to consider the dilemma carefully, though she already knew her mind about it. "He must still come. However, we must also extend Lord Darlington an invitation."

Her mother picked up her quill and poised herself to write, but paused. "Are you quite sure, my dear? Lord Darlington is quite

wicked, so I hear. I know I teased you in September about pursuing him, but it was only a jest.”

“He is a viscount, Mama. His title will further us in society, will it not?”

“It will, but that’s no reason to marry a man. If you loved him, that would be one thing, but if you don’t, I wouldn’t expect you to marry him.”

Perdita held her breath, trying to summon the courage to lie to her mother, a thing she had never liked to do and avoided whenever possible.

“I love him, Mama, and I believe with a bit of time I can tame his restless spirit.” She gave her mother an imploring look.

“Well, that is entirely possible, even of the worst rogues. I tamed your father, after all.”

There was a loud *harrumph* from the doorway. Perdita turned to see her father standing there. He looked dapper in his blue breeches and waistcoat, his gray mustache twitching as he watched them.

“Tame *me*?” her father chortled. “Woman, you didn’t tame me.”

“I most certainly did!” Her mother stood, moving from her writing desk and to her husband. “You were a terrible rogue in your day, and it was quite the feat to bring you to your senses.”

Perdita watched her parents with a blush in her cheeks.

“I only let you believe that.” Her father’s eyes twinkled as he caught Perdita’s mother by her waist and pulled her close, kissing her cheek.

“Heavens, Reginald!” her mother hissed, but she was smiling as she chastised him. “Not here!”

“Very well.” Reginald sighed dramatically. “Now, what’s all this about taming men?”

“Well.” Her mother waved at Perdita. “Your daughter seems to have gotten herself engaged and is only just now telling us.”

“Milburn asked you, then?” Her father studied her curiously. His gaze was serious rather than delighted that his daughter had just announced she was to be married.

Perdita shook her head. “Um, no, actually. It was Lord Darlington. You remember him, don’t you, Papa? He came to the garden party in September and stayed with us for a short time.”

Papa raised one dark brow. “Darlington? You don’t say...”

“Yes.” Perdita’s mother would be too blinded by the joy of knowing her child was to be married, but her father was a little more levelheaded and might see through things.

“And you want to bring him for Christmas, is that it? Well, bring the lad so I can measure him and see if he is up to snuff. He ought to have come to me first, like that Milburn fellow did.” Her father

appeared to look stern, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that made Perdita want to laugh. If only she really were engaged. It was surprising to see how happy she had made her parents.

"We were keeping it a secret until we were sure of ourselves." Perdita pleaded with her eyes, hoping her father believed her. She needed Vaughn to come. She'd tried to mention Samuel Milburn's reputation to her father before, but he'd brushed it aside as idle talk. He knew all too well that gossip had been known to ruin lives unjustly and was disinclined to hear any more about it. It was one of the few times she'd ever been furious with him.

"Hmm, well, invite the boy, then." Her father kissed her mother's cheek and left them alone again.

"Perdita dear, I am most happy for you, of course, but are you quite sure Darlington is the one? I mean, you may have offers again from more than one gentleman. I was worried that..." Her mother trailed off, and heavy silence filled the room. It was only a matter of time before the *ton* tired of her and she was left on the shelf to become a spinster. She did not mind, but she knew her parents wished to see her happily married.

"Vaughn is the one for me." She used his given name purposefully, and it had the desired effect.

"Is it truly a love match? You know I only ever wanted a love match for you. That's why I always invite every young man I can find in hopes he might be perfect for you. Milburn seemed so attentive, and everyone spoke well of him. I had hopes that you might feel the same...but if your heart belongs to Lord Darlington, then that's settled, isn't it?"

Perdita clasped her mother's hands and squeezed them. She was a determined matchmaker for sport, but Perdita knew her mother's intentions were pure. She had married Papa for love and only wanted the same for her daughter. As often as her mother could be exasperating, she was also impossibly wonderful. That was why it hurt so much to lie to her.

"Yes. It is a love match. I never thought I'd win the heart of a man like Vaughn, but somehow I did."

"Win his heart?" Her mother chuckled. "You only need to win his mind first. It is he who must win *your* heart." Her mother squeezed her hands in return. "Very well, I shall invite your darling Darlington." She winked at Perdita and walked back to her desk to resume her guest list.

"If you don't mind, Mama, I am to have tea with Lady Lysandra Russell this afternoon at Gunter's."

"Of course." She returned her focus to her list. "Give her mother my regards, and take a footman with you."

“Thank you, Mama. Don’t forget to send Darlington’s invitation today. I wanted it to come from you so he would feel welcome.”

“Consider it done.” Her mother pulled a fresh bit of parchment toward her and began to scratch away with her quill, her turbaned head bowed.

Perdita called for Hensley, one of the young footmen, to bring her cloak and summon a coach. It would be too cold for ices, which Gunter’s was most famous for. Tea would be preferable. They would also have to meet indoors. Gunter’s was a treat when the weather was fine. A lady could arrive in Berkeley Square and remain in her open carriage while the men rushed from Gunter’s to bring ices out to waiting customers. Indoors was perfectly fine for her intentions today. She and Lysandra had important things to discuss.

Hensley met her by the door and held out her dark-blue cloak. She slipped it on and took a white mink muff, tucking her hands inside. Then she and Hensley walked to the coach waiting for them.

When they reached Gunter’s, Hensley came inside with her but kept his distance so she might enjoy her time alone with her friend. Lysandra Russell was waiting, a tea service in front of her at one of the tables. Her bright-red hair was like a flame that danced in the lamplight of the shop. Lysandra didn’t seem to notice the appreciative stares of the men around them. But that was just how Lysa was, her head buried in books, her mind preoccupied with their shared purpose.

“Lysa.” Perdita took an empty chair opposite her friend at the small tea table.

“Oh! Perdita, forgive me.” Lysa blushed and raised her head from her stack of letters. She tucked the letters into her lap and poured a cup of tea for her friend.

“Thank you.” Perdita slipped the muff off her hands and sipped her tea.

Lysa beamed. “Our paper on the astronomical developments of the last few months is ready for publication. I believe we might be accepted this time.” Lysa grinned and nodded at the pen name they had chosen to hide their genders: P. L. Bottomsley.

“I’ve drafted a proper introduction. Officially, we are a gentleman from Tintagel, Cornwall. I’ve acquired the use of an address there. There’s a man named Mikhail Barinov. He’s agreed to collect any correspondence and deliver it to London first. I believe this time we shall have our ducks in a row. The Astronomy Society of London *must* publish us.”

Perdita couldn’t help but smile as well. This was her dream—their observations and scientific discoveries published. As ladies and not learned gentleman scholars, their articles had been continually

rejected. And so, a ruse had to be devised. The need for it was maddening.

"Brilliant, Lysa." Perdita took the article and reviewed the neatly written words, checking each page carefully. Then she handed it back to Lysa, who tucked it into a leather folio.

"I will submit it on the morrow with the messenger and let you know once I hear if we've been successful."

"Excellent." Perdita glanced around the shop, her eyes taking in the couples having tea. Gunter's was one of the few places in London a lady could meet with a gentleman alone and not worry about scandal or ruination. The door opened with a small bell tinkling as a group of men came in from the cold. Perdita recognized one of them, and her heart pitched straight to her feet.

Samuel Milburn was here.

"Lysa, I'm so sorry, but I must leave immediately." She nodded discreetly at Samuel, who was removing his hat and coat.

Lysa's eyes settled on the man as she nodded. "Of course. Good luck."

Perdita waved Hensley over.

"Miss?" Hensley asked, brushing crumbs from his trousers.

"I'd like to leave. Please have the coach brought around at once."

Hensley pulled his coat on and ducked outside. Perdita carefully walked around the edge of the tea shop, weaving between the couples and tables, trying to keep out of Samuel's sight. She pulled her hood up and reached the door just in time to overhear part of his conversation with the other gentlemen.

"You've still not proposed to the Darby chit yet?" one of the men asked.

Samuel chuckled. "Not officially. I'm waiting for Christmas. Women love that sort of romantic drivel. I also need to make sure she's mine. I have to be able to have her before I make my decision. There's enough fire in her that I believe she'd be a pleasure to break. Have to make sure though. She might be one of those weepy virginal debutantes. Can't have that. I want her to fight me before I break her completely."

His companions laughed, one comparing such "sport" with the hunting of a wild animal.

Milburn sneered. "Indeed, except one must be stuffed before it is mounted, while the other must be mounted in order to be stuffed."

The grating sound of their harsh laughter made Perdita nearly toss up her accounts. She couldn't bear to hear another word. She rushed out into the cold, not caring if the biting wind tore at her face. Samuel's threats were unimaginable. How could the *ton* be so blinded by him not to see his evil? Yet she feared that was the sort of darkness

lying in his soul. He was a man with no heart, and he cared for nothing except his own needs. She would not become his victim; she would do anything to escape such evil. Vaughn would be her salvation. She trusted him, something which should have been surprising, yet it did not feel so.

Evil and sorrow left very different shadows on a man's face. Evil was a malignant presence that smothered and strangled the goodness around it. But it was different with sorrow. Vaughn's eyes were painted in shadows of pain and loss. It was a shadow that might someday be vanquished by the rays of the sun. She had glimpsed the hope of it in his eyes when she'd kissed him last night, like sunlight streaking through the parted curtains of a mansion that had been shrouded in darkness for eons. It was foolish, she knew, to take pleasure in knowing their kiss might've lessened his sorrows, whatever they were, but she did.

Perdita looked around for Hensley and saw with some relief the coach was already approaching. She could not wait another minute this close to Samuel. He and his companions had confirmed her worst nightmares.

Thank heavens for Vaughn.

Hensley had their driver stop the coach, and he helped her inside. The velvet cushions were cold, but she sighed in relief when Hensley placed a foot warmer at her feet.

"Where to now, miss?" Hensley asked.

"Home, I suppose." She parted the curtains on the opposite side of the square, but then she held up a hand. "Wait. Stay here. I should like to go to that shop. The one just there."

She pointed at the little jewelry shop across the street. She could have sworn she'd seen Vaughn entering it. Had she been dreaming merely because she was thinking of him just now? There was only one way to find out.

Chapter 3

She climbed back out of the coach, heading directly for the row of shops. If it was Vaughn, she needed to tell him what she'd overheard in Gunter's. He had a right to know Samuel's intentions. He might have an idea of how to protect her against the man since Samuel had made it clear he wanted to get her alone.

Hensley closed the coach door behind her and followed her as she passed a milliner's shop and reached the jeweler's. She peered into the windows, which were frosted around the edges from the cold, but she couldn't see Vaughn.

Perhaps he'd gone deeper into the shop. She tugged on the brass door handle. It creaked open, and she slipped inside. The little shop was warm, but a faint musty smell emanated from the shelves where a variety of necklaces hung on stands and both bracelets and rings were displayed in glass cases. It was clear from the designs that these jewelry items were old, not newly fashioned.

Perdita peered around the shop, searching for Vaughn. She paused behind a row of tall shelves, considering the possibility that she'd only seen a gentleman who bore a passing resemblance to him.

A voice came from the other side of the wall of jewels behind which Perdita stood. "My lord, what may I do for you?"

Perdita perked up at the sound and was prepared to seek out the jeweler, but something held her back. She stayed hidden and peered between the dusty shelves, fighting the need to sneeze with one hand. She glimpsed an elderly shopkeeper with a hooked nose and spectacles speaking with a tall man with dark-blond hair. The man stood with his back to her, but Perdita was positive it was Vaughn.

"What can I get for this?" Vaughn held out a pocket watch, a very old but beautiful piece. Its silver cover glinted with light as it swung from a fine chain. The jeweler took it and held it up, leaving Vaughn to shift slightly. His face turned away from the jeweler, offering Perdita a glimpse of his profile and the pain etched in his features.

“Well now, let me take a look.” The jeweler paused to push his glasses up the bridge of his nose and studied the watch closely.

“Finely made, with the Darlington family crest... Forty pounds, I should think. Are you quite sure you want to part with it, my lord?” The jeweler eyed the watch and then Vaughn. Perdita held her breath. Hensley shifted behind her, and she threw out a hand, catching his arm and raising her other hand to her lips to indicate silence. She did not want to interrupt whatever Vaughn was doing.

It appeared as though he was selling off his family heirlooms. Given the condition of his home—the lack of furnishings and general disrepair—it shouldn’t have surprised her. However, if she was being honest, she didn’t want to think of Vaughn as so destitute he was selling such a personal item. Her heart gave a painful twinge as she held her breath, listening.

“Forty? I suppose that’s a fair enough price. Is there a ring which I might trade it for?” Vaughn set the pocket watch on the counter between him and the jeweler. His fingers didn’t immediately let go of the watch. Perdita’s heart gave another painful jerk. He was looking at rings? Why would he wish to sell a watch for a ring?

Then a thought struck her. Was the ring for her?

The jeweler lifted a velvet box onto the counter. “These here are quite lovely.” Perdita stood on tiptoe to get a better view. She was thankful the shelves were open for her to peer through.

“This one here, is it a ruby?” Vaughn pointed at a ring. She couldn’t see which because his body was blocking her view.

“Yes, a fine ruby. I suppose we could make a fair trade for the watch,” the jeweler said.

“Good.” Vaughn nudged the watch toward him. “Do you have a box for it?”

“I do.” The jeweler disappeared into the back and moments later emerged with a small blue velvet box. He placed the ring inside and handed it back to Vaughn.

“Thank you.” Vaughn took the box and tucked it securely into his coat and lifted his hat off the counter.

“Good day, my lord,” the jeweler said as Vaughn turned toward the door—and Perdita. Perdita grasped Hensley and propelled him around the opposite end of the shelf, just missing being seen by Vaughn as he left. Once she was sure Vaughn was no longer inside, she and Hensley moved around the shelf and approached the counter where Vaughn had stood. The jeweler was still putting the set of rings back beneath the glass display counter.

“Oh! Good day, miss” the jeweler said. “I didn’t realize you’d come in. How may I assist you?” He brushed his hands on his apron and readjusted his glasses with a warm smile.

Perdita noticed Vaughn's watch still sitting on the counter and tried to act slightly interested. "This is a lovely watch. May I see it?" she asked.

The jeweler eyed her quizzically. "The old pocket watch?"

She nodded, chancing one glance at the door. There was no sign of Vaughn returning.

"Of course." The jeweler set the watch down on the counter so Perdita could examine it. It was indeed an old watch, possibly Vaughn's father's or even his grandfather's. How could he bear to part with it? For a ring, no less?

She hadn't thought what it meant to provide evidence to support their story of an engagement. Had Vaughn believed he needed proof such as this? Or was it for a mistress? For some reason, she didn't think so. If he was as destitute as she now believed, he could not afford a mistress. That left her with the sad knowledge that the ring must be for her, and he had sold his watch for it. She had to buy it back. He had sold the watch, one she suspected was dear to him, for a ring she believed he meant to give to her. Therefore, she would make sure he got his watch back when the time was right. Vaughn was a proud man, and she would not endanger his pride by letting him know she'd witnessed this moment.

"How much for it?"

"Pardon, miss?" The jeweler's brows rose.

"How much to buy the watch? I'd like to buy it." She didn't want Vaughn to lose one of the last pieces of his family's past if she could help it.

"Well...I believe fifty pounds is fair."

She met his gaze. "But you traded it for forty."

"Forty-five then," the jeweler countered.

She lifted her chin. "Forty-two."

The jeweler stuck out his chin as well. "Forty-three."

"Agreed." She lifted her reticule onto the counter and counted out the notes. She rarely carried large sums of money, but she had planned to do a bit of shopping today after meeting with Lysandra. She hadn't expected it to be for her false fiancé.

She had the jeweler wrap it for her and then entrusted the box to Hensley.

"We're going home now, miss?" His hesitant tone implied his hope at the thought.

"Not a lover of clandestine meetings or secret missions, Hensley?" she teased. The footman, a man close to her age, blushed to the roots of his hair.

"It isn't that, miss... I just worry about you, is all."

The footman's honest comment caught her off guard.

“Worry about me?” she asked. He was unable to meet her eyes.

“I shouldn’t have said that, miss. My apologies.” He continued to avoid her gaze, and she didn’t force him to speak of it further. Mostly because she was afraid to hear what he would say. There was an infuriating pity that came from servants when they dealt with spinsters, as though even downstairs they felt sorry for the unmarried maids who aged on the shelf.

The thought made her sour. Women had a right to aspire to other positions than simply being a wife and mother, did they not? Yet those were the only positions society valued for them. It wasn’t her fault she didn’t wish to be seen as a broodmare. The idea filled her with a defiant purpose. Once she and Vaughn were done with this charade and Milburn had lost interest, she would devote herself to seeing her astronomy essays published.

“We have one more stop to make,” Perdita announced. “Have the driver take us to Half Moon Street.” Then she climbed into the coach and listened for Hensley to give orders to the driver.

She peered eagerly out of the coach window as they reached Lennox House. It was a stunningly built structure that emanated both power and beauty. Her warm breath clouded the glass. She rubbed her gloved hand on the window to remove some of the fog for a better look.

The coach came to a stop, and Perdita instructed Hensley to wait with the driver for her. Depending on how furious her friend Rosalind was at her request, it was possible Perdita would be cast back into the street. A small bout of nerves rose up in her, but she shoved them down. The two were friends, and although she had not had a chance to visit Rosalind since she’d married Lord Lennox and moved into his house, things shouldn’t have changed much, or so she hoped.

She rapped the large silver knocker and waited. The butler answered, and she was relieved to be allowed in once he had made the proper inquiries.

The butler directed her to a drawing room. Rosalind was working at a writing desk by the fire.

“Perdita.” Rosalind rose once she entered the room. “How are you?” Her voice lilted with a Scottish accent, one she no longer tried to hide as much as she used to. The accent rendered the dark-haired woman utterly charming with a touch of that Highland wildness.

“I am well, and you?”

“Very well.” Rosalind’s gray eyes twinkled. “Have you come to discuss your investments?”

“Yes, well, possibly. It is a matter of business, but it is also a bit delicate in nature.”

Her friend’s open smile turned to a frown. “Shall we sit?” Rosalind

led her to a dark-red brocade settee and poured a cup of tea from a pot on the table.

"Thank you." Perdita steeled herself for what she had to do. It was not like her to make such requests of friends.

Rosalind seemed to notice her hesitation. "We are friends, Perdita. Ask whatever you came to ask."

"It is a rather long tale, but I shall try to be brief. I'm trying to escape an engagement to Samuel Milburn, whose intentions I do not trust. I do not wish to go into details, but I am under some rather unsavory pressure to accept. I made a bargain with Viscount Darlington to act as my fiancé in order to put Milburn off. But Darlington's price in aiding me is..." She choked on the words, hating to have to speak this way to a friend. "Well, his fortunes have taken a poor turn, and he wishes me to ask for your husband to involve him in his next investment." There. She'd said it, even though it left a bitter taste upon her tongue.

For a long moment, Rosalind didn't speak, her brows furrowed as she studied Perdita carefully. Did she think Perdita was only trying to use her? Was she reconsidering their friendship?

"Darlington, you say?" Rosalind pursed her lips and thought. "I haven't met him, but I've heard of him. Bit of a wild fellow. Are you sure you want to attach yourself to him so publicly?"

Perdita sipped her tea and nodded. "Despite what you may have heard of Samuel Milburn, I assure you that man is a brute. He has every intention of breaking me if he can compromise me into marriage."

"*Break* you?"

"My spirit, and perhaps more."

Rosalind's pensive gaze turned into a scowl. "I haven't heard much about this Milburn fellow, but if he has you frightened, we shan't let him succeed in putting you in a position where you must marry him." She lifted a small bell from her tea tray and rang it. A footman appeared, and Rosalind spoke. "Please tell my husband I wish to speak with him."

The servant bowed and vanished.

"Is there really no way other than to enlist Lord Darlington's help? I'm sure you've heard the rumors about him," Rosalind said.

"I have, but I believe there may be more to him than the rumors give him credit for. When presented with a situation such as I have given him, he wished to help and asked only this favor in return. It's not what I expected of a notorious rogue, but I trust him. Does that sound very strange and foolish?"

"To trust a rogue? That is neither strange nor foolish, if it's the right rogue. I will ask my husband what he knows of Darlington."

“Thank you, Rosalind. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your help. It’s so upsetting to have to ask it of you.”

“Nonsense. This is precisely what friends are for.” Rosalind covered Perdita’s hand and gave it a gentle pat.

Lord Lennox appeared a moment later. He was a tall man with piercing blue eyes and blond hair, not unlike Vaughn, but there was a wild desperation to Vaughn that Lennox did not share. He was calm, relaxed, *settled*. Vaughn had a leaner appearance to him and a grimness to his bearing that gave him a melancholy darkness.

“You summoned me?” While Ashton’s tone was cool, his lips were curled in a teasing smile. He came over to Rosalind and pressed a kiss to her hand.

“This is my dear friend, Perdita Darby. She is also a customer of our bank,” Rosalind explained. “Perdy, please tell my husband what you told me.”

Perdita detailed what she had guessed of Samuel Milburn and his intentions, as well as her scheme with Darlington and the favor required as payment for his services.

“I’ve met him a few times around London. Not a bad fellow, or so I hear,” Lennox mused. “Milburn, on the other hand...well, I’ve heard about his mistress. The one who fell to her death. An accident, they say, but I’m not sure I believe that.”

Perdita nodded.

“So, Darlington is keen to invest with me?” Ashton leaned back in his chair thoughtfully. “He wouldn’t be the first, but there are good reasons why I am selective about whom I take into my confidence. Most believe the risks I take are too great, but they simply do not understand my longer plans and fail to see that in the end there is very little risk at all. But I require trust, and not all are willing to give it. I will not have my every action second-guessed. I believe he’d make a good partner. He has a good head on his shoulders, and I understand he was quite successful before his parents passed. The debts they left him with were extraordinary and ruined his own small fortune.”

Lennox shared a long glance with Rosalind before he stood and nodded.

“Very well, tell Darlington he may call upon me after the New Year. I shall discuss my next venture with him, and he can decide then if he still wishes to take part.”

His words were such a relief that Perdita was overcome with gratitude. “Thank you, Lord Lennox. Truly.”

“Any friend of Rosalind’s is a friend of mine.” He kissed her hand, and with a lingering glance at his wife, which made the lady blush, he left them alone.

“Silly man,” Rosalind muttered, though she was smiling.

Perdita had to agree. Lord Lennox was a silly, wonderful man. *Wait until I tell Vaughn. He'll be so pleased.* She had guaranteed not just an introduction, but involvement in Lennox's next venture. Perhaps she would survive Christmas after all.

Chapter 4

Vaughn felt naked without his pocket watch. It had been a few days since he'd sold it, and he and Barnaby were now headed to Lothbrook. He kept reaching into his coat for the watch, and his hand came back empty.

The piece had belonged to his grandfather, handcrafted by Thomas Mudge himself, and it had been given to him by his own father when he turned sixteen. He'd had it for so long he'd forgotten what it was like not to have it sitting securely in his waistcoat pocket. It was the last thing of any real value he had left to sell.

But obtaining a ring for his future bride had been important. It sat safely in his coat pocket, but he kept checking the box to make sure it hadn't vanished. Between his secret plan to actually seduce her for her fortune and using her to become acquainted with Baron Lennox, he was already indebted to her.

Vaughn was not a man who liked to owe a debt. The ring was his last chance to prove he could offer her something before he ended up owning everything that had once been hers. Even if he had something else left to sell, he couldn't stomach visiting that jeweler's shop again. *Selling my past to secure my future.* He only hoped it would work.

The coach he sat in was stuffed with people like hens in a coop, but a damned public coach was all he could afford. Farmers sat on either side of him, their shoulders pressing into his. The odor of the barnyard was rather too pungent for Vaughn to stomach. He'd taken turns holding his breath and attempting to breathe through his mouth. It helped, but *only* just.

The coach came to a halt at the crossroads, and the driver shouted that they'd reached Lothbrook. Despite the press of bodies, he was chilled to the bone from the icy wind that cut through the coach's cracks. Vaughn surged out of the coach, his boots crunching into a light layer of snow. He stretched his legs, relieved to be away from the crush of the vehicle and its occupants.

The town was covered in snow, the roofs of the shops and houses capped with ice. The skies were dark with wintry clouds that seemed to stretch the darkness across the village and swallow up the meager lights from lamps still sitting in windowsills.

Lord, he missed Lothbrook in the late summer. Even when he'd been here last September, the town had been full of flowers, and the days had seemed endless.

"Oi!" The driver's shout caught Vaughn's attention. He spun in time to see Barnaby rush to catch the valises the driver had unceremoniously dropped to the ground. Vaughn scowled as he and Barnaby collected their cases and walked toward the edge of town.

"What a tosser!" Barnaby muttered as he tramped alongside Vaughn, carrying one of the cases while Vaughn managed the other.

"Agreed," Vaughn said. "But it is the season of forgiveness. And if all goes well, dear Barnaby, we shall never have to suffer travel by public coach again."

"Humph. That's *assuming* you win Miss Darby's heart, my lord. She's a crafty chit, that one," Barnaby noted. Other men might have cuffed a servant for such frankness, but Vaughn had always preferred to employ those with a mind to speak up and share observations. They also tended to be cheaper.

"I think I stand a fair chance. She was quite taken with me the other night." Vaughn puffed out his chest and ignored his valet rolling his eyes. He hadn't imagined Perdita's impassioned reaction to his kiss or his touch. He was an excellent lover and had never mistaken a woman's passion.

The Darby estate was not far, but in the cold...well, it wasn't exactly a pleasant stroll. By the time they set foot on the long stone path that led to the Darbys' country house, Vaughn's feet were frozen, and he couldn't feel his face. The merry candlelight framed in the windows beckoned him forward, and he knocked upon the door. A footman opened the door, bracing himself against the cold.

"Pardon me, my lord, but you are Lord Darlington, correct? Miss Darby has been expecting you and feared you might run late," the young man replied. Damnation, he'd wished to arrive earlier than this. *Bloody public coaches. If we hadn't had to stop every three miles to let off farmers and their damned chickens, we wouldn't have been late.*

"Yes." Vaughn hastened up the steps and gratefully had Barnaby hand them his luggage. Another footman took his hat and coat.

The numerous servants who dashed about the house were all decked out in fine winter livery. They passed several maids on their way up the stairs, and Vaughn swallowed a pang of guilt for his one beleaguered little maid, Pippa, who was responsible for a townhouse that should retain at least a dozen more. That would be one of the first

things he changed if he could get a successful return on his future investments with Lennox.

“Please, this way. I’ll show you to your room. I’m afraid you’ve missed dinner, but Miss Perdita insisted you have a full tray brought to your room when you arrived.”

“Did she now?” He was surprised at her thoughtfulness, but then again, between her and her friend Alexandra, Perdita was the sweeter of the two. Alexandra...now *that* woman had a cornered badger’s temper.

Vaughn followed the footman up the stairs, Barnaby trailing behind, muttering about old, cold country houses. They were shown to an elegant chamber, the same one he’d stayed in before when he’d come down for the garden party in September. The large bed looked warm and inviting, as did the fire in the hearth. Thick Aubusson carpets covered the floors, making the room feel cozy.

His own chambers back in London were in a severe state of disrepair, not at all like the dark oak wainscoting here, which contrasted with the dark-green embossed wallpapers with gold ivy patterns. Even the bed hangings, a rich brocade of dark gold, matched the coverlet and sheets.

After the footman left, Barnaby set about putting away his master’s clothes in a large wardrobe. By the way his valet sighed wistfully, he knew the young man missed having real furnishings as much as he did.

Barnaby approached the shaving stand, where hot water stood ready in a pristine blue-and-white basin. Clean clothes and face towels were neatly folded next to a bar of expensive milled soap. The valet turned back to him, a little streak of guilt flashing in his brown eyes.

“Perhaps the country isn’t as bad as you remember?” Vaughn said with a rueful smile.

“No, my lord.” Barnaby’s face turned red, and he hastily resumed his work.

Vaughn leaned back against the bed and sighed. Part of him still couldn’t believe he was here. But he truly was desperate enough to accept Perdita’s offer of a false engagement, because he knew he could seduce her into wanting a real one. Women were quite easy to woo, after all, so long as they weren’t in love with another, as Alexandra had been. Of course, should Perdita deny her own desires for him, he would at least still have the meeting with Lennox to help secure his future.

Vaughn straightened as a worried thought streaked through his mind. Was it possible that Perdita already loved another? Surely if she did, she would have convinced *that* man to participate in this game, not him. With a low growl, Vaughn retrieved the ring and tucked the

box into a drawer in one of the night tables by the bed.

He turned at a soft knock upon the bedroom door.

“Enter.”

The door opened, and Perdita slipped inside, followed by a footman with a tray.

“Lord Darlington, I wanted to make sure you’ve been properly seen to. Set the tray on the table, please, Hensley.” She gestured to the mahogany fireside table. The footman set the tray down before departing.

Vaughn was momentarily distracted by the sight of the covered dishes. His nose picked up the scents of soup, fresh bread, roast beef, potatoes, and peas. He even glimpsed a berry tart on a small plate. God bless the woman—real food was just what he needed after his long journey.

He forced his thoughts away from the food for a moment, no matter how much his stomach grumbled about it. He approached a fine Chinese lacquer commode in the corner of the room, which contained decanters of brandy and whisky.

“Care for a drink?” he offered, hoping she would sit with him in the two leather chairs facing the fire.

“No, thank you,” she replied. Perdita played with her skirts, and the nervous movement almost made him smile. Her dress was blue, with Van Dyke sleeves trimmed with Belgian lace. Her bodice and hem were dusted with silver embroidery, and a lock of her dark hair dangled loose upon the creamy skin of her neck. The woman looked positively edible, like Christmas pudding and a glass of sherry.

“Perdita.” He spoke her name, unsure what else to say before he asked the question that was now plaguing him.

She inclined her head. “Vaughn.” There was a long silence between them before he approached her.

“There is no other man, is there?” he asked, his heart pounding as he waited for her to reassure him this entire charade wasn’t a fool’s errand.

Her brows knit in confusion. “Other man?”

“Yes. One you love, who for some reason isn’t riding in here on a bloody white charger to save you from Samuel Milburn.”

She paled and her fists clenched. A blush replaced the pallor in her cheeks. “No, of course there isn’t another. If there was, I would be engaged, not begging someone like you to help me.”

He tilted his head. “Someone like *me*? What, pray tell, makes me the fortunate man for this situation?”

Perdita glared at him. “Because... Wait, why are you asking me this *now*? I thought we’d agreed to this...” The look of anger faded to panic, and for some reason that cut into the thick wall around his

frozen heart, warming it ever so slightly.

"I did agree," he said. "I merely wish to make sure that I'm not doing this when someone else should be. If there's another who loves you, he should be here. Not me."

Perdita blew out a breath. "No. There's no one. It's why I need you."

Bloody hell, that shouldn't have aroused him, yet it did. The thought of her needing him, even in this way, was enough to fill his head with wicked thoughts that would send her running if she could only read his mind at that moment. He wanted to make her need him in a thousand other ways, until her body could no longer bear the touch of another because only his would satisfy her. He pushed the rush of hungry thoughts aside and focused on their conversation.

"And here I am, minus the white horse, in my rusted armor." He gave her a mocking bow.

She curtsied elegantly in return. "I suppose that makes me a damsel in a dire state of distress? Good heavens, I'm the heroine of a gothic novel."

"So it would seem." He caught her hand, lifting it to his lips. "I should love to see you fleeing down some darkened corridor, your hair unbound, your body clad only in the flimsiest of nightgowns, clutching a candelabra as you flee from a dark stranger. I would take you into my arms and rescue you. Then, of course, I would make mad passionate love to you so that all worries of dark strangers would be forgotten."

Her pupils widened as he spoke. He took a moment to caress the back of her hand with his fingertips as he watched, drinking in every minute expression of hers.

She seemed torn between laughter and consternation. "*That's* what I am rewarded with? You coming here just to seduce me? I waited a fortnight for you, made sure the cook prepared the best supper fresh for you, and—"

Vaughn didn't let her finish. It had always been his policy to silence a chattering woman the most pleasurable way he knew how. He pulled one arm around her waist and tugged her into his arms. She gasped against his lips, and he couldn't resist smiling.

Lord, she tasted divine. She shivered against him, and he slid one hand through her hair, tugging lightly on the strands. Perdita whimpered and curled an arm around his neck, kissing him back harder.

Seducing her was going to be easy.

He slid his other hand down her body, cupping her backside, then gave it a playful smack. She jolted, and he winced when her teeth sank into his lip.

“Ow!” He pulled back, letting her go as he touched where his lip stung. Perdita steadied herself against the nearest chair, brushing her loosened hair back from her face. He had ruined her coiffure, and she looked as though she’d been thoroughly tumbled in bed. It was a good look for her—soft, vulnerable, and a bit mussed. He licked his sore lip and grinned.

“You don’t want a bit of compromise with your engagement? I am ready to offer *all* of my services, not just my reputation.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

“You *struck* me!”

He flashed a crooked smile. “I spanked you, darling. There’s quite a difference. Tell me you didn’t feel the jolt when I did.” He knew she’d deny it, and he was going to enjoy proving her wrong over the next several days.

“I felt nothing!” she snapped.

“Then why are you complaining if you felt nothing?” he teased, twisting her words.

She spun on her heel and headed for the door. “Oh!”

He caught her from behind and pulled her back as he closed the door, trapping her in his arms. “Perdy, wait.”

“Do not call me Perdy,” she growled and turned to look over her shoulder at him. Their noses brushed, and her eyes flashed with a beautiful fire. It made him hot all over.

“Why not? I know Alexandra calls you that.” He smiled as his gaze lowered to her lips. She turned to face him, smacking his chest with her hand.

“Because she is my friend. Friends call me Perdy, but not you.” He had to bite back a groan of hunger seeing the fire in her eyes just then. When had a woman’s eyes ever been so captivating? He couldn’t recall a time before this when he was so fascinated by a woman’s gaze.

“We aren’t friends,” he agreed. “But we are affianced, aren’t we?” He caught one of her wrists and brought her hand to his lips, kissing her palm.

“What are you doing?” But she was staring at him as he kissed her palm. Then he began to work kisses up her arm, inch by inch.

“Reminding you”—he paused to kiss her between each set of words—“that we...need to get...more comfortable...with each other...and that means...more of...*this*.” He tilted her head up and pressed a slow kiss to her stunned lips.

He could hear the little growl she made and felt it as it rumbled from her chest. There was nothing more delightful than proving a woman wrong about her desires. It wasn’t about force, but about slow, thoughtful seduction. Not only of the body, but of the mind and

heart as well.

He kissed her for another long moment, waiting until he felt her melting into him, and then he released her. She stood there, eyes glazed with desire, lips swollen, hair delightfully mussed, and her skirts wrinkled where he'd clenched the fabric tight to keep his own frayed control in check.

"I have something for you." He walked to the night table and retrieved the ring. Perdita was pale again, her eyes fixed on the little velvet box.

"Vaughn, you didn't need to—"

"I did and I wanted to. Even if this engagement is false, I would still provide my bride with a token of my affection." He held the box out. He did not kneel, nor did he present it with any fanfare. That simply wasn't the sort of man he was. If she couldn't see what he was offering her and understand the sacrifice he had made, then she wasn't the woman he had thought she was.

She took the box from him, their hands meeting briefly, yet still causing a spark at their touch. He watched her face as she opened the box, memorizing every detail. The way her eyes darkened the moment she spied the ruby ring, the way she tilted her head, the loose curl bouncing against her neck and shoulders, and finally the way her lips parted on a soft gasp.

"Vaughn, no, this is too precious. You must not give me this. Not simply to further a charade." She took a tiny step toward him, the open box held out. He reached up and clasped her hands, closing them over it.

He captured her eyes with his, letting her see how serious he was. "I insist."

"But—"

"No," he responded in a clipped tone. He knew what she intended to say—that he had so little to give as it was—but he *needed* her to have this, even if he could not bring himself to explain why. There were some things a man could not share with his intended bride.

Perdita opened the box again and looked at the ring. "It's very lovely." When she spoke there was a small catch in her voice, and it made his chest clench and his throat tighten.

This is all I can give you. The last of what I have left.

"You like it?" He felt like a fool, begging for scraps of her attention, needing to hear that the sacrifice of his grandfather's pocket watch had not been in vain. She traced the ruby stone and the two small diamonds flanking it, bit her lip, and nodded.

"I do. I don't believe I've ever owned anything so lovely." She paused, and then with a radiant smile at him, she asked, "May I wear it now, or must I wait until Christmas?"

He cleared his throat, that strange tightness still there, making it hard to speak.

“Now is fine, quite fine,” he finally managed.

She plucked the ring from the box and slid it on her ring finger. It was almost a perfect fit, with just a bit of looseness, which could be easily remedied when she visited the jeweler in the village. The ruby gleamed in the firelight.

“Thank you.” Perdita stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him. The lingering sweet taste of her felt different from any other kiss. This wasn’t one of lust, desire, or anger. This was simply *something else*. It evoked a flutter of strange and unidentifiable emotions in him that he didn’t want to think about.

A rose hue accented her cheekbones as she touched her lips. “Eat your dinner before it gets cold, and rest well. Tomorrow the holiday festivities begin in earnest, and I shall need my white knight at my side, rusty armor or no.”

Without another word, she was gone, leaving Vaughn to stare after her, his hands twitching with the sense they missed holding her.

Chapter 5

Perdita lingered in the hallway, watching the coaches pull up outside. Ladies in cloaks and men in greatcoats ascended the steps to the house. Her parents stood ready to greet their guests. Perdita stayed back, slightly distracted, wondering when Vaughn was going to come down. He had ordered a tray for breakfast early that morning, so she'd missed seeing him at the table. After last night, she felt oddly nervous and a bit excited.

Because he's dangerous and the charade you're playing is far too exhilarating. Her inner voice was happy to chastise her for her foolish behavior around Vaughn. But she hadn't forgotten why she was doing this. To save Papa, as well as herself.

She twisted the ruby ring on her finger, even though it felt quite comfortable there. Vaughn had given it to her, not someone else. To think she'd been worried about him buying it for another woman. A hint of a smile escaped her lips, but she wiped it away. This thing between her and Vaughn was nothing more than a cunning deception, and she had to remember that. She would return the ring and his pocket watch once this was all was over. It was the least she could do.

Her mother called to her. "Perdy, dear, come and see to the guests." She joined her parents with a sigh and a forced air of happiness. A pair of men rode up on horseback, their fine beasts kicking at the fresh snow that had fallen early that morning. She started to smile as they approached, but she halted. Her slippers slid on the snowy steps as she recognized one of the men.

Samuel Milburn had arrived. Fear spiked inside her, and she fought the urge to turn and run.

"Miss Darby." Samuel came up the steps, grinning.

To everyone but her, he appeared to be nothing more than a handsome man with dark hair and dark-brown eyes, with no hint of the real darkness within him. But she knew it was there. She'd heard him herself in Gunter's, laughing with his companions about how he

would enjoy breaking her. There was a darkness in his eyes, one that promised pain, not just for her but for her family if she defied him. It was the look of a man who believed he held all the cards and was simply biding his time before collecting his winnings. Knowing what she did about him made Perdita want to run and hide, even though she usually preferred to stand and fight.

She would be damned if she'd let him turn her into property by blackmailing her. However, he was a guest, and she could not prove his evil inclinations to her parents, so she would simply have to be careful during the house party.

That was why Vaughn was here. She hoped his very presence would protect her in ways she could not manage on her own. As much as she hated relying on a man, she felt she could trust him in this matter. And he seemed to know the sort of man Samuel was and thought the man a bastard, just as she did.

"Mr. Milburn, welcome," Perdita said, her tone cool but polite. There was no need to anger him, not if the charade with Vaughn was to succeed. The goal was to simply remove his interest in her, not provide him with reasons to desire retribution.

"Thank you, Miss Darby. I trust you have given thought to what we spoke of when last we met?" He flashed a charming grin that didn't fool her one bit. She did not miss the look of calculation he gave her or the way he eyed her critically from head to toe, the way a man would study a horse he planned to acquire at Tattersall's.

"I have." It was all she would admit to. The time to reveal her engagement had not yet come, and she wouldn't let it slip until Vaughn decided the time was right. He knew how to deal with a man like Milburn.

She stepped back and let him pass, along with his companion. Another coach was arriving, and she was relieved to have an excuse to leave Mr. Milburn to be seen to his room.

Another dozen guests arrived before Perdita was allowed to retire to her room before lunch was served. She decided to stay in her light-green wool gown with red trimming on the sleeves and hem. Most of the ladies would be changing out of their carriage dresses, but since she hadn't traveled, she would do well enough in her day gown.

The entire notion of changing one's dress three or four times a day frustrated her. There were a dozen other things she would prefer to accomplish on any given day, and having to change to suit the time of day or activity was both bothersome and unnecessary. Men didn't have to change clothes so frequently, and she was envious of that freedom.

She chose to visit the library on the second floor on the opposite wing of the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Vaughn. Most of the

guests were staying in the east wing of the house, but she had placed Vaughn on the west side closer to her own chambers.

There was no sign of him in the corridor, however. It was possible he was taking his repose in his bedchamber, or perhaps she had missed him on the stairs. He could be in one of the dozen other rooms in the house now, chatting with the other gentlemen. Or perhaps he had gone riding in the snow. The thought she might not see him was upsetting.

I don't want to miss him...yet I do. Then she shook her head. *I miss his kisses, that is all. I don't know the man well enough to miss him.*

She and Lysandra had discussed on more than one occasion how a man could distract a woman from her academic focuses with their passions. At the time, Perdita had no personal experience to argue with, but now...now she understood completely how a man could so thoroughly disrupt one's thoughts.

Perdita went to one of the bookcases and took out a leather portfolio containing several essays she was working on. She then settled into a little window seat in the library, her latest astronomy paper resting on her lap. She still had revisions to make, but today she wanted to read it for clarity and construction before she sent it on to Lysandra. She raised her legs up in a bent position so that her red satin slippers peeped out from the hem of her skirts, and she rested the pages on her knees.

She wasn't sure how long she'd sat there before she had the distinct impression that someone was watching her. It was far too easy to lose herself in her work, and apparently she hadn't noticed someone enter the library. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, and she tried not to panic, her first concern being that Samuel Milburn had found her alone. She raised her head and glanced about.

A lone figure leaned against the shelf not too far from where she sat in her alcove. When she saw who it was she wasn't afraid, but her heart still jerked into a rushed pace.

"Vaughn!" she hissed. "You startled me!" She set her paper aside as he came over. She tried to stand, but he prevented this by sliding onto the seat beside her.

"You were quite engrossed in whatever you were reading. I didn't wish to intrude upon your thoughts." He gently lifted her feet and stretched her legs over his lap, the position highly scandalous, but the cozy intimacy was so irresistible she didn't protest...much.

"We shouldn't..."

"Nonsense." He moved her skirts so he could place one of his large hands on her left calf.

Perdita jolted. "No, Vaughn..." She grabbed his wrist, and he lifted his face to hers.

“Easy, my sweet, just breathe.” His fingers stilled on her leg, and he leaned in to brush his lips over hers. His gentle kiss calmed her, even though a rush of shivers danced along her skin.

“Better?” he asked with a smile against her lips.

She nodded. “Yes. I was just frightened.”

“That’s what makes passion exciting.” He paused to stroke her leg again. “But I will take things as slowly as you wish.”

“But I thought you liked control.” She said the words softly, even though no one but the books could witness this scandalous moment.

“I do, darling. I adore control. But only once the lady feels safe with me.”

“I feel safe with you,” she replied truthfully.

“Good. That matters to me greatly.” He continued to stroke her calf, and she closed her eyes briefly, relishing his touch.

His fingers were long and elegant but not delicate. Beautiful hands...for a handsome man. Perdita watched in fascination as his hands touched her. The heat of his palms soaked through her white stockings to her skin, and she couldn’t stop the wave of heat that followed through her whole body.

A true rogue could conjure up passion like a wizard. He could cast spells that made her forsake rational thought with only a wicked smile and a tender caress from her ankle up to her knee. He let her skirts fall back down over her legs but kept his hand on her skin. There was something seductive about his hand beneath her dress, touching her legs, without being able to see what he was doing. It was as though the excitement of what he *might* do next was greater than what he actually did. She wiggled slightly but made no attempt to flee.

“Now, what were you reading that had you so enraptured?” Vaughn was gazing at her, his blue eyes clear as a summer sky. The sunlight came in through the window, trickling down his golden hair and illuminating the strands until they glowed in a halo about his head. His lips were slightly curved, as though he was lost in a pleasant but possibly scandalous daydream. It was the sort of expression a woman could stare at for hours and wish desperately that it was she the gentleman had upon his mind.

“Oh, I was just...” She tried to tuck the pages of her astronomy essay behind her, but he reached around her body and pulled the essay in front of him to read it.

“Please, don’t—”

“Shh. I’m *reading*,” he teased as he continued to stroke her left calf in tickling circles with his fingertips, then paused. “Astronomy?” he asked.

“Are you surprised that a woman might have a love of the sciences?”

“Surprised perhaps, but far from displeased. It has been my experience that far too many men lack a proper interest. They learn enough to feign knowledge at their gentlemen’s clubs and pass along half-remembered conclusions as if they were their own. It can be quite depressing when one is looking for decent, intelligent conversation.”

“And you? Do you have an interest in the sciences?”

“I do, though I admit that I am woefully ignorant of the more detailed elements of the subject of this piece. It seems quite brilliant.” His eyes ran the length of the page as though scanning it.

“You think so?” She couldn’t resist wanting to preen at his praise.

Vaughn did not answer at first, and his brow was furrowed as he studied the pages. “Do you know the man who wrote this? His observations are quite interesting, though I daresay some of the calculations are over my head.”

“Er—yes. I know the man. He’s pursuing publication of the piece, once it is ready.” She was not going to tell him she was the article’s author. He was no doubt the sort of man who believed women did not belong in the sciences.

“I imagine he will have success then. Does he often have you read his work beforehand?”

She nodded. It didn’t feel right to conceal anything from him, but this was a part of her life that held no connection to the bargain they’d made, and she would not share this secret with him. She was far too accustomed to men thinking ill of women who had minds of their own, and did not need his ridicule whilst they were trying to keep up their engagement act. “Where were you this morning? I thought you might come down for breakfast.”

Vaughn smiled his infuriating cat-in-the-cream grin. “A man ought to have a few mysteries about him.” He moved his hand beneath her skirts again, this time even higher, until he touched the soft garter that held the stocking up. He flicked the silk ribbon bows, and another wave of heat rolled through her.

“Would you like me to teach you about passion?” he asked, his voice now velvety soft.

Despite her body’s cries of yes, she shook her head. “No, thank you, I’m well versed in it.”

He grinned, still toying with the bow of her garter. “Liar. You’re afraid to risk it.”

“I most certainly am not,” she huffed, then curiosity got the better of her. “Risk what, exactly?”

“Falling in love with me, of course.” His crooked grin should not have made her heart flutter, but it did.

“I see no danger of that, I assure you.” She took the papers from him and climbed off her seat. She set her article on a nearby table and

went toward the nearest bookshelf. There were three rows of shelves that were parallel to the door, and she often liked to hide behind the last one to go unseen if someone came to the library looking for her.

Perdita glanced over her shoulder and saw Vaughn following her. He trailed his fingertips along the surface of the walnut reading table. The burgundy waistcoat he wore went well with his dark-tan trousers. Perdita had to jerk her thoughts away from how well-fitted those trousers were.

“So...you say you know of passion, that you are well versed in it, but I assure you, you don’t know what it means to be with *me*.” He said this softly as he came up behind her. She faced the shelves, hidden from the rest of the library. Vaughn toyed with the flare of her skirts at her lower back, tugging on a red silk ribbon that trailed down her back from the sash at her waist.

“This is not part of our arrangement,” she said at last, though less defiantly than she had intended.

“You misunderstand me. What I’m trying to say is that whenever Milburn sees us together, he needs to *believe* we are lovers.” He leaned against her from behind, cornering her against the shelf. His lips feathered against her ear, and she shivered. Her womb clenched, and her knees ached.

“He will believe,” she replied, though her words trembled.

“I have no doubts that you are a fine actress, but I fear that without some experience you will do no better than a young girl swooning over her first infatuation. Milburn will see it for what it is—drawing attention to itself and utterly unconvincing.”

“And what would you suggest?”

“That you let go of your fears and allow me to guide you on a short voyage into those passions, while keeping your greater virtue intact. Only then will you be able to tap into those thoughts in Milburn’s presence. Only then will he see in your eyes what you want him to see.”

Perdita huffed. “I am sure you would say anything to get under a woman’s skirts.”

“True, I would. But it does not make my words any less reasonable.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she relented. “I have found your kisses a pleasant enough diversion. I doubt whatever it is you have in mind will be much different.” She threw out the challenge, and then her heart raced to see what he would do.

“And that, my dear, shows how much you have to learn.” The heat of his body pressed against hers made her forget for a moment how to breathe.

“So you would teach me, then?” She kept her tone light, even

though she was feeling strangely light-headed.

“Teach you to be wicked? Absolutely,” Vaughn said. “When you sit across from me at dinner and I look at you, he will see in your eyes and through the blush of your cheeks that we spent an hour in the library together, doing *this...*” He lifted her skirts, traced his hand up her right leg beneath her petticoats, and touched her *there*.

Perdita gasped, but he covered her mouth with his other hand. Rather than be frightened that he was silencing her, she was excited by the way he took control. She clutched the shelf in front of her, a wet heat pooling between her thighs as he explored her with his fingers.

“He should see that I own you, that I have touched you here and tortured you until you were begging for sweet release.” He murmured each wicked thought in her ear, and she struggled to stay standing. She wasn’t afraid, not of his muffling her sounds or the gentle but firm exploration of her folds with his fingers. He knew just how to touch her, how to stroke her. She had never known being touched in such a way could feel so...*wild*. The rush of sensations below her waist, the way her nipples hardened against her corset, his warm breath against her neck, all mixed with the press of his body against hers from behind...it was too much.

“Show me your dark side, Perdita,” Vaughn whispered, and she felt her body seize and come apart. Stars dotted her vision, and she felt herself falling. Strong arms caught her, lifting her back up.

She realized through the haze of her slowly dissipating climax that he was carrying her away from the bookshelves and back to the window seat. She blinked against the bright sunlight as he set her back down on the window seat’s soft cushions. Her head was swimming with a thousand emotions, but most of her felt dazed, shaky, and confused. He had just touched her at the apex of her thighs, and she’d come undone. The sensations, the heated explosion inside her was like nothing she’d ever felt before.

She looked up at him, blinking as she tried to stay calm and not cry. What he’d done had her feeling open and vulnerable. She wanted him to hold her, keep her close while she came down from the steep height her body had climbed. He leaned over and brushed his lips over hers.

“Tonight at dinner, when I look at you, think of this moment, my hands on your bare skin between your pretty thighs. Milburn will see what you wish him to see.”

With that he turned and walked away, leaving Perdita bewildered, her body lax yet trembling on a floating cloud of feelings she was too afraid to analyze. Vaughn was a *master* of sin, there was no doubt. She couldn’t help but worry that a small part of her might indeed be in

danger of falling in love with him.

Perhaps he was truly more dangerous to her than Samuel.



Vaughn rapped his knuckles on the door to Mr. Darby's study.

"Come in."

Vaughn entered and found Darby bent over his desk examining a collection of shells with a magnifying glass. Snow fell outside the bay window behind him, which would leave a fresh layer for any gentleman riding tomorrow.

Vaughn's impression of Darby was that he was a rather studious man, a man invested in the sciences. Just like his daughter, it would seem. He suspected she'd written that essay she'd been reviewing and she had tried to hide the fact from him. But her expression had given her away. Her face had been so open, her eyes so earnest in that moment as she seemed to yearn for his approval.

No doubt she was afraid he would be just like any other man and discount her ideas. But her arguments were sound and her conclusions logical. It was a paper worthy of publication, regardless of who had written it. He would find a way to convince her of that once they were married.

"Ah, Lord Darlington. I've been expecting you." Darby chuckled as he set the magnifying glass down.

"Well, I wasn't sure if...your daughter had informed you." Vaughn was in uncharted territory here. He'd never expected to be in this situation, yet here he was.

"Your engagement? She mentioned it. I was a little surprised, of course. Perdy tells me almost everything, and she's never mentioned you before, except this past September." Darby studied him with a gentle curiosity. It surprised Vaughn. Most fathers with unmarried daughters would have been chasing a man like him off their estates unless they were desperate. Yet Darby was far more like his daughter than Vaughn might have guessed. He was of a rational mind, just like her.

"I admit we should have come to you at once, but I did not want to trap her into any commitment until she was sure she wished to marry me."

Darby chuckled. "Noble words for one of London's more notorious rogues, or so I hear. You aren't part of that League of

Rogues are you?"

Vaughn shook his head. "No, certainly not." The League was not simply some club one could join, though gossip spoke of them as if it was. Investing with Ashton Lennox, one of the League members, was as close as he would get to being part of their number.

"Good, good. So you're here to ask for my permission to marry Perdita?"

He nodded.

"Well, as you know, my daughter has her own heart and mind. My opinion on the matter holds little weight. She will do exactly as she pleases."

"That may be true," Vaughn replied, "but I also believe she values your opinion. I feel duty bound to pass any test you might put me through so that she will feel you accept the match as well."

Darby tilted his head. "Are you aware that another gentleman here at the house has expressed an interest in Perdita's hand?"

"Samuel Milburn? Yes, I'm aware, although he has no idea of our engagement. We were hoping to have you announce our happy news tonight at dinner. We believe it might direct the other fellow to seek another bride." Vaughn knew full well that it would be hard to prevent Milburn from pursuing his blackmail on Perdita, but he secretly hoped that once Milburn saw that Vaughn was in fact going to marry her—assuming he could convince her it was a sound idea—that Milburn would give up.

"I see."

Vaughn waited, but Darby didn't speak further.

"You will make the announcement?" he prompted.

Rather than answer Vaughn, the older man stroked his chin, studying Vaughn as though he were a shell beneath his magnifying glass.

"Why do you want to marry my daughter? I'm aware of your financial troubles, but there are many heiresses worth far more that I'm sure you could easily win over. What makes my Perdita of such interest to you?"

That was the test he had been expecting. He had to answer carefully but also honestly. Darby had the look about him of a man who could read a person well. Vaughn reached for a conch shell and examined it.

"What makes this conch shell worth studying more than the rest tucked away on your shelves? The color of this shell and the exquisite pattern of its grooves make it unique among the rest. Perdita isn't like other ladies I've met. She's genuine. She challenges me without fear, and I find that engaging. She's a damned clever creature too. Did you know she's pursuing publication of her scholarly articles on

astronomy? She told me she was reading them over for some gentleman, but the handwriting is too clear and neat to belong to a man. I recognized it at once as hers. Her conclusions are brilliant, and I plan to do everything in my power to assist in her pursuits.” He smiled at the thought. “Watching her show up those old fellows at the astronomy society would be quite satisfying.” Vaughn paused when he realized he’d been gushing over Perdita like a young boy.

Mr. Darby watched him with open amusement. “Glad to see your affections are well placed. But I won’t offer my blessings until you *prove* your love. She can marry you or not as she chooses, but know that I have my eye on you, Darlington. Break her heart and I’ll bury you in my woods where no one will ever find you.”

The threat, though pleasantly delivered, had been unexpected. Darby cared deeply about his daughter. It would have made the older man proud to know his daughter protected him just as fiercely, but as Perdita had made no mention of the blackmail to her father, Vaughn would follow her lead and maintain his silence on the matter.

“Understood.”

“Good. Now, why don’t you help the other young lads collect the Yule log. We must light it tonight.”

“Of course.” Vaughn left Darby in the study and asked a passing footman to have his cloak, hat, and gloves brought to him. When he reached the front door, he found a crowd of young men already there, all dressed warmly. They were chatting away and laughing as they readied themselves for the Yule log-gathering party.

“Are you joining them?”

Perdita suddenly appeared at his side. Lord, the woman could be stealthy. Once they were married, he would have to have little bells sewn onto her gown so he could hear her coming.

“I was instructed by your father to assist the others.” He took his cloak from the footman who had rushed to him with his outerwear.

“You listened to my father? Goodness, Lord Darlington, whatever reasonable, gentlemanly thing shall you do next? I swear you’ll lose your wicked reputation at this rate,” she teased him, and he adored the sparkle in her eyes as she did.

“As a *gentleman*”—he emphasized the word—“I would like to invite you to join us.”

Her winged brows rose. “Truly? Most men would not think to invite a woman to partake in such a sacred and masculine ritual.”

Vaughn glanced at the collection of eager young lads surrounding them and sighed dramatically.

“Miss Darby, please do me the honor of saving me from this hoard of bucks, who will surely drive me to the nearest bottle with their inane antics if I do not have a grounded, sensible creature

to accompany me.”

She giggled. “In that case, I accept. Let me fetch my cloak and gloves.”

He couldn’t deny the excitement that fluttered in him at the thought of spending more time with her. When he’d come upon her in the library earlier, she’d stopped him dead. Before, he’d always focused on women most when they were naked in his bed, but there was something different about Perdita. She was fiery, challenging, yet alluring and sweet. He hadn’t known a woman could be so complex in personality. He found he rather liked that depth to her.

When he’d spied her in the library window seat, he had known he would find a way to rouse her passions, but he hadn’t expected to be so affected by her reactions to him. Holding her in the library, thinking of her secretly penning astronomy essays and defying the conventions of society, then picturing the way she blushed at his exploring hands before trusting him to bring her to climax... something inside him clicked into place.

This plan of a false engagement had begun as a way to climb out of financial ruin, but everything had changed, and that no longer mattered. What mattered now was winning her heart and claiming her as his wife. He knew he’d settle for no other woman. She was a bottomless pool of mysteries, an enchantress who drew him out with her innocent lips and eyes full of secrets. He was quite convinced he could spend years getting to know who Perdita really was.

Vaughn was still picturing how she tasted when he noticed Samuel Milburn staring at him from across the hall. The man was scowling.

Milburn nodded. “Darlington.”

Vaughn ignored the sour look he was given and offered a nod back. Then Milburn came over, dodging the other young men as they bounded about the hall like pups.

“Chasing the skirts of Miss Darby, are we?” he asked.

“Chasing? No. *Caught*.” He smiled slowly, watching his meaning sink in for the other man.

“Caught? By that you mean...”

“We are engaged. The announcement is to be made tonight at dinner.” Vaughn pulled on his gloves, allowing his usual uncaring manner to be displayed. He didn’t want Milburn to see any desperation or urgency. The man must not sense the true purpose of their engagement.

Milburn’s cheeks reddened, and his eyes narrowed. “When did you court her? She’s been in the country for the last few months, and I know you’ve been visiting the gaming dens in London.”

Milburn was too bloody astute for his own good. Vaughn finished with his gloves and arched a brow. “You can’t expect a gentleman to

reveal his secrets.” Let the bastard make what he could of that.

“I had intentions toward her myself. I’d already spoken to Darby.” Milburn’s voice turned into a low, warning growl. That would have bothered some gentlemen, especially those who knew of Milburn’s cruel and abusive nature. But Vaughn wasn’t one of them.

“Sorry to tell you that I got there first, old boy. And you know I have no intention of sharing what’s mine with any man.” Vaughn slapped the other man on the shoulder. He felt the tension rise between them. They weren’t foolish young lads barely out of the schoolroom. They were men, ready to face each other down like stags over territory. Vaughn was more than ready to battle the bastard for Perdita’s sake. He’d love a chance to bloody his knuckles on Milburn’s face.

Milburn seemed ready to argue further, but Perdita appeared at the top of the stairs, wearing a red cloak with white ermine fur lining the edges. Her dark hair had escaped the loosely pulled up Grecian style, and bright-red ribbons had been threaded into her hair to hold back her locks. She was a perfectly delectable little creature.

And she’s all mine.

Vaughn grinned eagerly as she came down the stairs, and he held out his hands to her. She placed her gloved hands in his, allowing him a moment to study her. She had a cloak on, but her gown seemed a bit thin for walking about in the woods.

“Will you be warm enough, darling?” he asked, genuinely concerned. One did not charge about the snowy woods in a fine tea gown.

“Yes. This isn’t my best gown, but I didn’t want to miss out on the experience simply because I had to change my dress.” When her nose wrinkled, it made her adorably sweet, and Vaughn couldn’t resist smiling. Damn, since when had such sweetness ever been so fetching to him? His bed partners before had been moody, sensual, and as friendly as cats in heat, but Perdita was nothing like them, and he found that refreshing. She turned as though just now realizing Milburn was standing there next to them.

“Oh, my apologies, Mr. Milburn. Did I interrupt your conversation?” Her wide eyes were filled with innocence, but Vaughn knew she had interrupted them on purpose and was glad for it.

Vaughn answered for him. “No, you did not. We were simply catching up, weren’t we, Milburn?” He challenged his rival with one lazy and somewhat contemptuous look.

Milburn’s dark eyes burned with a hateful fire, but he couldn’t lose his temper in front of the other guests. He stormed off, shoving a few lads out of his way viciously enough to have them grumbling and brushing their coats in displeasure.

“No holiday spirit there,” said one.

Vaughn turned to his fiancée. “My, that was exciting. A bit like poking an angry bear.” He chuckled and offered Perdita his arm.

It seemed the others had decided they were ready to begin, and the crowd of men suddenly rushed out the front door in a wall of fluttering cloaks and clattering boots. They bounded into the snow like hearty young foxhounds.

Perdita giggled as the men began their wild romp toward the forest that bordered the property. “Heavens, look at them go. You’d think they’d been kept indoors for a week.”

“My lady.” Vaughn lifted her by the waist and set her down in the snow. Some of the men had already worn down a steadier path ahead of them. It would be much easier on her skirts to walk on packed snow.

Perdita turned her head to hide a blush, then lifted her gown with one hand and began to walk. Vaughn took her other arm, and they moved together into the woods. Due to the heavy snowfall, only a few birds were chattering on trees, and Vaughn couldn’t resist the temptation to tease Perdita.

“Look there.” He pointed with his free hand toward a blue-and-yellow bird with black markings around its throat and eyes. It clung agilely to a tiny bare branch of a stout little tree.

“Oh, he’s lovely.” Perdita paused to watch the bird. The branch was thin enough that the bird’s weight made it dip and bounce as the creature adjusted its position and fluttered its wings.

“That is a blue tit,” he said. “Tits always turn blue in the winter when it’s cold. He has a cousin called a great tit, similar markings, but a much bigger chap.” He waited, holding his breath to see if she realized the joke he was trying to make, that the tits which turned blue weren’t birds...

“I believe you’re trying to tease me.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You know as well as I do that tit has *other* meanings.”

“As far as I know it simply refers to a diminutive creature, such as a titmouse or a tomtit. I cannot be responsible for any meanings *your* imagination has come up with.”

“Well, nevertheless, you must stop talking about *blue tits*,” she whispered in a half-amused, half-scandalized tone.

“I promise to return yours to a lovely shade of pink once we get back inside.”

“Vaughn!” she admonished.

“What? You began such talk, but that doesn’t mean I cannot contribute. Yes, I believe a few kisses, a bit of sucking will bring the pink back nicely.” He leaned down to murmur the last part, which

only made her gasp.

“Stop this,” Perdita said, her face already beginning to flush.

“I suppose you don’t want to hear me describe chaffinches? They have the most attractive pink breasts.”

She looked as if she might punch him, but then she thought better of it. She huffed and walked a few steps ahead before she bent down. Before he realized what she was up to, he caught a face full of snow.

He brushed off the powdery residue from his face, sputtering.

“You will pay for that, my darling.” He crouched down and started to collect his own handful of snow in his gloves. When he rose, ready to aim, there was no sign of her.

But he saw a clear track of dainty boot prints in the snow, leading deeper into the woods. With a wolfish grin, he began to stalk his lady, looking for signs of a red cloak within the snowy forest. When he caught his red-hooded lady, she would pay for her mischievous behavior, and they would both enjoy every minute of it.

Chapter 6

Perdita wrapped the edges of her cloak tightly about her body to

keep it from showing around the base of the large tree she hid behind. Throwing a snowball at Vaughn had been far too great a temptation to resist. She liked to see him ruffled and caught off guard. He seemed more real and a little less like the rogue from a schoolgirl's forbidden daydreams. Not that she minded that side of him, but she longed to see the real Vaughn, not the façade he showed to the rest of the world.

Once she'd thrown that snowball, she knew he would seek revenge, no doubt in a wicked way that would leave her breathless and shaky. So she'd turned tail and fled to make the chase much more rewarding for them both.

She should have chosen her white cloak rather than the red, but she had so loved the contrast of red against the snow.

And now I shall pay for it.

Far ahead of her, she could see the young men in their quest for the perfect Yule log. They needed something large that would burn for twelve days. It wasn't really possible to find a log that large, but men loved to challenge each other over silly things like that.

Perdita turned her focus back to the forest. She closed her eyes, taking in the sounds around her. The chatter of the blue tits and the occasional snap and creak of frozen branches were the only noises she could detect. She opened her eyes, wondering where Vaughn had gone, or if he had moved at all. As she peered around the tree, she almost expected to see him close by, ready to pounce. Nothing. The forest was empty as far back as the path that led to the house.

Where the devil had he gone? She turned back to the woods and screamed. Vaughn had somehow gotten around her! Her heart leapt into her throat at the sudden unexpected sight. He pushed her flat against the tree and clamped one gloved hand over her mouth.

"You left your delectable behind unguarded, sweeting." The *tsk* he gave was gentle and wicked, just as his smile was in that moment. He

pressed his body against hers, his hips against her stomach. She'd never felt so small and vulnerable as she did at that moment. It should have scared her. Any young lady in a similar position would have been terrified, but Vaughn holding her captive like a dark winter forest god set fire to her blood.

I am as wicked as he is. The realization was buried beneath a rush of sensations as Vaughn removed his hand from her mouth and kissed her. It was a ruthless sort of kiss, one that marked her, conquered her, and reminded her that she belonged to him—yet not in the way a man like Milburn would. Vaughn didn't own her, and he certainly didn't want to break her. But in this forest, surrounded by the snow and the silence, he owned her very soul for briefest heartbeat of a stolen kiss.

"You are clever," he whispered in her ear. "But not quick enough, I'm afraid. Shall I punish you here?" He swept one hand beneath her cloak to cup her bottom. Her body burned at the touch, even as she wondered what sort of punishment he might inflict.

"Please, Vaughn," she murmured, not sure what she was pleading for. She placed her gloved hands on his shoulders and dug her fingers in, holding on to him. He tilted her head up by placing his fingers under her chin.

"Oh, the things I could do to you..." His eyes raked over her before settling on her lips. "But I believe a kiss is what you deserve." He removed his hand from beneath her chin and bit the tips of his gloved fingers, tugging the leather off his skin. He let the glove fall into the snow beside them.

"Yes, please kiss me." Her gaze fixed on his mouth as she encouraged him. He had the most perfect lips, ones that were soft, warm, and sensual. The kind that drifted along her bare skin and melded with her own lips and seemed to erase the world around them until nothing else existed.

"Lift your skirts," he growled in a dark and demanding tone.

She shivered and whispered back, "What? Why?"

Vaughn arched a brow in a way that she was coming to recognize—that she was treading on dangerous ground by questioning him. A lady who asked him to explain his seductions might end up with more than she expected. Vaughn had mentioned spanking once before. The idea had startled her at first, but his idea of a love pat was not one of cruelty or abuse but of pleasure. The thrill of thinking of him smacking his hand lightly on her bottom was undeniably erotic, and she wanted to experience it.

"Lift them now and ask me to kiss you, darling." His voice was now low and smooth. "If you do it properly, I'll reward you. Fail and I will punish your darling little bottom. I don't care if I must bend you over my lap in the snow for all to see."

Her heart hammered while she glanced around, afraid someone would see them. "But..."

His hand caught her chin, making her focus on him again. "No one will see us, darling. The men are too far off." He swung his cloak over her left side, shielding her from anyone who might see them from that direction. "Now, raise your skirts and ask me for a kiss. And when you do, you will call me *my lord*."

The confident set of his body as he moved back, giving her room to raise her skirts, was almost as infuriating as it was exciting. Perdita clutched her skirts and hiked them up, revealing her underpinnings. The cold air hit her legs and made her shiver.

"Please kiss me..." She hesitated, and her lashes lowered for a moment, but only a moment. "My lord."

"Impertinent little creature. But that will do, for now." His condescending tone made her bristle.

But she didn't have time to reply. He swooped down on her, capturing her mouth in his. She nearly dropped her skirts, but his bare hand was suddenly between her thighs. He didn't slip his fingers into her, not like he had in the library. He only touched the sensitive nub at the top of her mound. He pressed on it, then moved the pad of his finger in small circles over it.

She shivered and tried to wriggle away. It was too sensitive, made worse in the outdoor chill, but he gripped her throat with his other hand—not squeezing but holding her still in a gentle but possessive grip. She was a prisoner of his delicious torment. Arching her back, Perdita knew she had to surrender to him, and in that moment she *wanted* to.

His tongue traced the fullness of her lips as she kissed him back hungrily. His mouth was urgent, exploring and demanding. It was everything she loved about him.

The realization sent a jolt of sensations down her body to meet his fingertips between her thighs. She wanted to belong to him, to be the only woman who ever knew his dark side, one that matched her own.

We are twin souls curled around one another, always straining for that next kiss, that next lingering caress stolen at the right moment.

Her body shook as pleasure rolled through her. She leaned back against the tree, Vaughn's cloak shielding her as the ripples of pleasure continued to flow through her. He teased her a few seconds more before he withdrew his hand and let her skirts fall back into place. He pulled his lips away from hers. They were close in body, but in that moment, she felt there was no distance between them at all. They could have been one being, one beating heart and soul.

When Vaughn's lips curved into a smile this time, there was no wickedness to it, only a boyish delight. Her heart turned over at the

sight. The cool intensity of his gaze was gone. She was seeing that secret part of him she'd longed for. It was as though she'd wandered into an old attic and come upon a portrait covered in old curtains. She'd pulled away the faded fabric, and as the dust cleared, sunlight from a high window illuminated the hidden face painted in oil just for her.

It was her own private moment, one she would never have to share with the rest of the world. A piece of him that belonged to her, if only at this moment in her memory. The dreamy intimacy of it held them both spellbound.

Vaughn leaned in slowly this time, and his next kiss was sweet, soft, yet deep. His lips lingered and coaxed hers into a slow, playful dance that seemed to go on forever. She twined her arms around him, caressing the back of his neck, making him tremble when she reached a sensitive spot where his neck met his shoulders.

"What in the blazes are you doing to me?" he murmured. The confusion in his voice was soft and sweet, making her smile against his mouth.

"*Me?* It is *you* who has me bewitched," she responded.

"Then we are both under some sort of spell." He brushed his gloved hand over her cheek before he dropped his cloak from her body and bent to pick up his discarded glove. She had to let go of him, and her arms felt empty without him.

Vaughn cleared his throat. "We should catch up with the others before we are missed." He put his glove back on and then held out his hand to her. She took it, and they began the long walk into the woods to find the other men.

The rest of the party was deep into the woods by the time they found them. They had discovered a log they all agreed would be perfect as the Yule log.

"Ho there, Darlington. Care to give the beast a good whack? We're just about through." One of the young men held up a sizable ax and pointed its blade at the fallen log.

"I suppose." Vaughn removed his cloak and tossed it at the young man before he claimed the ax.

Perdita stepped back, as did the others, giving Vaughn room enough to swing.

He wielded the ax as though he'd been a woodsman to some ancient medieval queen. The silver blade arced through the air and sank into the wood with a heavy *thunk!* The trunk broke in four hard swings, and he moved four feet down its length to separate it again from the ragged base next to the stump.

"Is that enough, do you think?" he asked.

"I believe so," one of the men replied. Four others bent to lift the

Yule log and begin the burdensome process of carrying it home. Vaughn went to retrieve his cloak, and another young man engaged him in conversation.

Perdita wished to join him, but such an intrusion might seem rude.

"So, you and Darlington are engaged?" Milburn's cold voice made Perdita jolt. He caught her from behind by the arm, squeezing hard, and she was rooted to the ground with him holding her in front of him, her arm twisted behind her back. If he twisted it much farther, it would break. Pain radiated up from her elbow, and she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

"Unhand me. You're hurting me," she hissed.

Milburn ignored her. "I spent *four months* playing friends with that old fool you call your father, and now you accept another man in your bed? I will not stand for this. Don't forget what I told you. I can turn over my evidence to the magistrate anytime I wish. If I do, he'll be facing imprisonment or worse."

Perdita's tongue seemed to swell, and her throat choked with fear. "I haven't forgotten."

"Then I suggest you come to your senses and tell Darlington to break it off. Otherwise, your father will pay for your stubbornness."

Milburn's threat was so different from Vaughn's. Vaughn had punished her with kisses and with pleasure. Milburn was a coward and a cruel beast who simply wanted to control her every action. Despite her fear, rage came roaring to the surface. She had to fight him. If he won now, like this, she'd never be free.

"Unhand me now or I will scream. Then you will be forced to explain to these gentlemen here what you were doing." She spun to face him, her hood falling off her head. "You may frighten every other woman in London, but *not* me."

She jerked her arm free of his startled grasp, and then she leaned close. "I could not break my engagement with him even if I wished to." It was a lie, but she hoped Milburn would believe it. "Lord Darlington won't give me up, not for anything. If you harm me or my family, you will face his wrath. Never forget that," she hissed. "Speak to me like that again, and I will have you chased off my property by the dogs until your feet are sore and blistered." She kept a steady stare at him, the way one would at a dangerous animal, before she turned and strode off.

Politeness be damned—she was going to join Vaughn. Her temper had only just covered the swell of fear inside her at Milburn's actions. To grab her and threaten her like that? He was bolder in his intentions than she ever could've guessed, and far more dangerous than she'd wanted to believe.

She had hoped her false engagement to Vaughn would deter him.

That clearly wasn't the case. She hadn't overestimated Vaughn, but she *had* underestimated Milburn. He wasn't afraid to use his supposed evidence to destroy her father. What was she going to do? She tried to convince herself that his actions were only because the wound to his pride was still fresh. Perhaps in time he would lose interest. This plan had to work, or else everything would fall apart.

Vaughn turned at her approach, his mask of cool aloofness on his handsome face.

"Miss Darby." He bent his head in polite greeting, and the other gentleman did the same. "Is everything all right?"

She painted a false smile on her lips. "Yes." She knew if she told Vaughn what had happened, he might use the ax he still held to chop Milburn into pieces. As appealing as the idea was right then, she couldn't allow that to happen.

"Are you cold? I offer myself as an escort back to the house." He provided his arm gallantly in front of the other men.

She nodded and slipped her arm through his. "Thank you." He handed the ax back to the others, and they started to walk back. Milburn was nowhere to be seen at first, but then she spied him a dozen yards away, talking to his companion. It didn't reassure her. She had a terrible feeling that Samuel Milburn was not going to back down.

Chapter 7

Vaughn lounged against the wall at the back of the large drawing room which was already full of gentlemen in their evening clothes. He did not feel like joining in their conversations at the moment. The ladies had been coming down in pairs for the last hour before dinner, but there was no sign of Perdita.

He didn't like it. She wasn't the sort of woman who took overly long preparing herself for dinner. Guilt gnawed at him. He worried that what he'd done in the woods had been a step too far. She had been pale and withdrawn on the journey back, and he hadn't been able to coax her out of her thoughts, even to tell him more about her love of science. He'd even teased her about the names of constellations, pronouncing them wrong, but she hadn't corrected him.

The distant look in her eyes had eaten away at his confidence. He'd never worried about his actions with a woman before, but with Perdita *everything* he did mattered.

Did I push too much? Demand something she couldn't give? Most gently bred ladies did not enjoy his particular flavor of passion—the commands, the obedience, the edge of pain blurring into pleasure. It was why he never seduced innocents and kept his activities restricted to widows and mistresses who shared his hungers.

When he'd kissed Perdita today in the woods, she'd surrendered so *sweetly* and had turned his world on its axis, shifting everything like tumbling sands in an hourglass. He was still unsettled at how perfect she was, how much it had tested his self-control not to take her there and then. But perhaps he had seen only what he wanted to see. Perhaps she had been afraid of him and not truly interested in him.

Was he so starved for a woman's touch that he'd misread her? Was she even now hiding from him because she was too ashamed of what had happened, afraid he would do it again? He couldn't bear the thought. He wouldn't forgive himself if it turned out he'd had it all

wrong. But before he could seek her out to apologize, the door opened at the far end of the room and Perdita appeared.

She wore a ruby-red silk gown with a flounced hem trimmed in white lace, as though snowflakes had been caught on the lush fabric. Her bodice was embroidered with tiny flowers, and puffed sleeves clung to her elegantly sloping shoulders. A few loose dark curls bounced and caressed her creamy skin. Skin that he longed to taste. The woman was a vision of loveliness, and he feared he had ruined any chance of marrying her.

He held his breath, pacing around the room's edge toward her, watching her as she spoke to other guests. He studied every tilt of her head, every move, trying to figure out what was going on in her head. His blood burned at the thought of her, but fear held him back. At last he decided to speak to her. Perhaps her tone toward him would reveal more.

Perdita's father stepped in between him and his goal. "Darlington."

He met the older man's amused face with smothered frustration. He needed to speak to Perdita, to ask if she was all right. The last person he wanted to speak to was her father, a man who would most likely shoot him if he knew what Vaughn had been up to with his daughter.

"Yes?"

"I have spoken to Perdita, and she's agreed that making the announcement tonight will be fine. I thought I would make a toast during dinner. Does that suit you?"

"You spoke to her?" Vaughn hung on that single fact, his heart racing. "When?"

Darby tilted his head. "After you returned with the Yule log. I trust things haven't changed since we spoke this afternoon?"

"No, certainly not. I am just glad to hear she spoke to you." It gave him a glimmer of hope that perhaps she had enjoyed their time in the woods and that he hadn't frightened her off. Still, she could just as easily be continuing with her plans to dissuade Milburn's pursuit.

"She did." Darby's eyes held a twinkle. "I admit, I didn't believe it until she told me how fond she was of you. I won't deny my daughter her heart's desire, but"—he leaned in close to Vaughn—"my threat about burying you still stands. You'd best not break her heart, or they will never find you."

Vaughan nodded slowly in understanding.

"Good." Darby smacked his shoulder with an open palm and stepped out of his way.

Perdita was alone now, watching him. He could feel the eyes of the room, particularly those of the ladies, tracking him as he and Perdita met. They would whisper behind their fans about this meeting,

speculate on every look, every smile or word shared between them. He couldn't stop them, nor would he try. That was the entire point of this charade—for people to talk, to notice that they were together, and for word of it to reach Milburn over and over until he lost hope of his pursuit.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. She opened her lips, and he found himself afraid of what she might say. He rushed to speak before her. "About today...in the woods." He looked for any sign of horror at the reminder of that moment. "I didn't... I shouldn't have made you do that."

Perdita's lips parted even farther, and her eyes widened. "But..." She leaned in closer. "I *liked* what we did." She frowned. "Did it not satisfy you?" She raised a gloved hand to her lips, her cheeks pinkening with a sudden blush.

"No!" He reached out to grasp her other hand. "That is to say," he clarified at her wounded expression, "I did enjoy it. Too much. I feared I'd frightened you, that you'd seen my black heart and it was too much for you." He faltered when he realized he was confessing to such wild things. Things that no man should say to a woman. He sounded like Vaughn's friend Ambrose. That fool had rushed headlong into love for Perdita's friend and never looked back. Vaughn had no intention of falling in love, even with his future wife. He'd always wished to have an affection for his wife, because it would make a marriage happier, but love was too dangerous, too volatile an emotion. He never wanted to risk his black heart for love.

Rather than rush to reassure him or deny that she had been afraid, Perdita raised her chin. Her warm brown eyes seemed to glow with some mixture of amusement and elation.

"Vaughn, if you had tried to do anything to me that I did not wish, I wouldn't have let you." Her lips curved into a ghost of a smile, and the wit and confidence he'd feared had left her was back.

Still, he could not resist asking. "But when we came back, you were so quiet. I was worried—"

"The infamous rogue worries over me?" She was still smiling, but for a brief instant, he saw that shadow in her eyes. Then it was gone. "I admit my thoughts were elsewhere," she said. "But it had nothing to do with you or what transpired between us."

The flood of relief at her words was surprising. He hadn't known until that moment just how much he needed her to tell him she was all right.

"Now, I'm afraid we shan't be sitting close at dinner. Mother has spread us out in the seating arrangements." Her nose wrinkled as she showed her clear distaste for this arrangement.

"She didn't put you near..." He gave a slight jerk of his head

toward Millburn.

"No, thank heavens." Perdita's eyes brightened again. "After dinner, I thought we might talk. We must prepare for him seeing us together, correct? One in private?" Her gaze dropped to his lips, and he could guess what she was truly thinking. The excited gleam in her eyes was impossible to miss. The little minx clearly missed him and all the wicked things he could do. *And to think I was concerned she didn't enjoy it.*

She bit her lip. "Oh dear, you're grinning again."

"Hmm?" He realized she was right, but he couldn't stop.

"You worry me when you look like that. Like a wolf looking at a rather plump rabbit."

His smile widened. "I do like my rabbits plump." He offered her a playful smirk and won a heated blush from her.

The door to the drawing room opened, and dinner was announced. Vaughn tucked her arm in his with a chuckle.

He leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Remember our time in the library. Whenever I drink from my goblet of wine, I shall be thinking about how you taste." He felt a shiver ripple through her. *That* would keep her occupied this evening, because he planned to drink a lot of wine.

The couples convened in the dining room, their voices bouncing through the corridors. Darby House seemed to always be a place of life and delight, no matter the time of year. The gold lamplight glowing on the shimmering evening gowns painted a pretty picture amidst the fine furnishings. There was a lively elegance to it all that spoke of money spent, but spent well. It was nothing like his parents and how they would have run the home.

When his older brother, Edward, had died, the loss had broken his parents' spirits. They had never been deeply in love as a married couple, but they had shared a love for their eldest son that bound them together in grief. Vaughn hadn't been given much thought before his brother's death, and after his passing he became only a forced interest. His father had retreated to his club, and the debts soon began to mount, while his mother withered away day by day, sometimes spending hours in Edward's room, clutching a miniature portrait to her breast.

The servants moved like ghosts in the gloomy, quiet house, and Vaughn had no strength in him to fight his parents' plans to turn their home into a mausoleum for their dead son. Instead, he'd obtained a bachelor's residence on Jermyn Street and stayed there until they died. It had left him with a bittersweet ache for the beauty and the warmth he felt here at Darby House. His desire to secretly win Perdita's hand was growing, but he now doubted his ability to give

her a warm and happy life she deserved. He hadn't been raised by sensible, loving parents like she had, and he wouldn't know the first thing about making a life like that for her.

"Now *you* are frowning," Perdita teased, mimicking his scowl.

He couldn't resist a gentle laugh. "I am. Deep thoughts always make me frown." He buried his dark thoughts and added in a low whisper, "I think we should meet tonight. The library after midnight?"

"Agreed," she answered back, just as quietly.

They entered the dining room, and there was no more opportunity to speak privately. Vaughn escorted Perdita to her seat at the far end of the table before he walked back to his own. He was seated near Perdita's mother.

Damnation. He couldn't see Perdita's face, the various decorations on the table blocked his view. A large stuffed pheasant's colorful feathers flared out as though it was ready to take flight. Vaughn could just see the curve of Perdita's neck through the dip of the back of the bird's wings.

Dinner wasn't going to be as enjoyable as he had hoped. He looked toward the elderly gentleman who sat to his left. He had a better view of Perdita.

He nudged the older fellow. "Excuse me. Would you mind trading places with me?"

The old man's face turned ruddy as his eyes darted quickly to Mrs. Darby and back to him. "Trade places?" he blustered. "Good God, man, the lady of the house is right there beside you. The sanctity of a lady's table seating is the cornerstone of our empire!" He announced this so loudly it drew surprised gazes from the ladies and gentlemen nearby. Even Perdita was staring at him, worry creasing her brow.

Vaughn rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. *Cornerstone of the empire? For God's sake.* There was nothing like public mortification in the middle of a Christmas dinner to shame even a hardened rogue like himself. He was half tempted to find the nearest Christmas pudding and shove his face into it to avoid the stares. The elderly man was still watching him.

"What the devil would make you demand to swap seats, young man?"

Vaughn almost choked. *Young man?* He hadn't been called that in years. Hadn't *felt* like that in years. He was twenty-seven, not some boy fresh out of school. He cleared his throat.

"I merely hoped to have a better view of a certain young lady." Damn, why did he feel flushed all of a sudden?

"A lady, you say?" The old man lowered his voice and leaned in conspiratorially. "Empire be damned." He poked Vaughn. "Out of your chair, boy."

Vaughn glanced toward Mrs. Darby, seeking her approval.

"I'll allow it," Mrs. Darby said. She smiled a knowing little smile before she turned to the guest on her other side to engage him in conversation.

Vaughn hastily exited his chair and switched with the old man. When he sat down, he glanced toward Perdita. She raised one hand to cover her mouth, no doubt hiding a smile. Even from across the vast distance of the dinner table he could see that darling twinkle in her eyes, and it made him feel...*giddy*. He grinned, feeling like a damned fool, but oddly, he didn't mind. Vaughn reached for his glass of wine and took a sip. Perdita blushed, and he chuckled. Perfect.

"Nice to see young love," the old man commented. "Everyone seems to assume that when you're my age we forget what it's like to be young. You'd better hold on to her, my boy." The older man's tone turned wistful, and he tugged on his cravat.

"Oh, I'm not in love. I barely know her."

"Balderdash. Love doesn't require you *knowing* everything about her. Sometimes love is part of the mystery. Especially for men. Women will always have their secrets, the little twinkles in their eyes, the hidden smiles that make us wonder just what it is they are thinking about. My Arabella is still quite the mystery, and we've been married fifty years." He nodded toward an older woman who sat close to Perdita. Her loveliness hadn't faded with time, and Vaughn could still see the attraction.

Vaughn was tempted to argue that it wasn't really possible to love someone you didn't know, but Mr. Darby stood up with a glass in his hand, drawing everyone's attention.

"Thank you for joining my family for Christmas. It's so lovely to have guests during the holidays. It warms my heart to have my house full of people." His thanks were followed by a murmur of agreement by the guests. "And tonight, I have some wonderful news. I'm delighted to share with you all that my daughter, Perdita, and Lord Darlington are engaged. I would like to propose a toast—to Lord Darlington and my daughter, Perdita."

The guests echoed his toast and drank to it. Perdita sipped her wine, her head down, but she was red-faced. Vaughn was tempted to do the same. Everyone at the long table stared at them as the news settled in. It was one thing to be invited to Darby House for a party, but to be announced as Perdita's intended was going to cause ripples in the various social circles. He'd expected that, of course, even counted on it, but watching it occur before his eyes in a roomful of people was both embarrassing and fascinating. He wasn't sure what he ought to do, so he resorted to his usual behavior and flashed a cool smile at the curious faces turned his way.

“And finally, to remind you all,” Darby said, clearing his throat, “tomorrow night, we shall have the ball.” This second announcement did the considerate job of distracting the ladies, who all murmured in delight at the coming dance. Many of the young men in attendance grinned eagerly, and the dinner began.

Vaughn paid little attention to much else over the next two hours. His focus was on Perdita. He loved to watch her. There was something enchanting about the way her eyes lit up as she talked. She was an animated creature, but there was no falseness about her, no shallow vapidity like far too many ladies her age tended to display. She was both genuine and honest. Her words were always well chosen and truthful.

A gentleman beside her made her laugh, and Vaughn grinned at the sound. A pang of jealousy followed. He wanted to be the man who made her laugh like that.

“Someone’s not happy you won the fair lady,” the old man on his left muttered. His words dragged Vaughn’s attention away from Perdita.

“What do you mean?”

The man nodded down the table. “That fellow at the far end. He looks quite put out. Did you steal his sweetheart, I wonder?”

Of course it was Samuel Milburn who was glowering at him, his black eyes filled with rage, his mouth a thin line. Vaughn had been so focused on Perdita that he’d forgotten the whole reason he was here: to save her from that bastard.

“Actually, I didn’t steal her. I rescued her,” Vaughn responded truthfully.

“Did you, now?” The old man chuckled before he took a sip of his soup.

“I did,” Vaughn affirmed, his focus still on Milburn. That man would bear watching over the next few days. He was the sort of man who would seek revenge if his plans were foiled—which meant his threatened blackmail might yet come into play. He only hoped Mr. Craig was making some progress on that front.

Vaughn spent the remainder of the meal dividing his attention between his dinner companions. The man on his left, Mr. Chatwin, was the one who had graciously switched places with him.

After dinner, the ladies returned to the drawing room while the men proceeded to the billiard room for port and cigars. Vaughn didn’t really wish to play, nor did he wish to smoke and converse with anyone. He was careful to slip out of the room once the others were sufficiently distracted.

A cold voice disrupted his walk down the hall. “I know what you’re doing.” Vaughn froze next to a marble bust of a noble lady and

turned to see Milburn closing the door of the billiard room behind him.

He forced himself to relax, even though every muscle inside him was ready for a fight. "What, pray tell, is that?"

"You and that little fool. She thinks she can outsmart me by bringing you here. But I'm no fool. We both know you really don't want to marry her. So what is she giving you? Sharing her bed wouldn't be enough. It must be something else. Is she paying you? Whoring out for your services? I know you are desperate enough, but I still can't believe you'd be such a *pathetic* man." Milburn *tsked* snidely. "How far the Darlington name has fallen."

Vaughn's hands curled into fists at his sides, but there was no point in bashing the man's head, even if it would feel bloody good. He drew in a slow, calming breath.

"You are mistaken. I am going to marry her, and I'm not desperate. It seems to me *you* are the desperate one. Are you angry she refused you? Maybe you shouldn't have shoved your last mistress out a window. Or maybe it's because you attempted to blackmail her. That tends to dampen any romantic notions a lady might have for a man. Unlike you, I don't hurt women."

"Oh, but you do." Milburn countered, his voice quiet but clear in the hall. "We both know what kind of man you are. Does she know what you need? How you find your pleasure? Someone should warn the poor girl." Milburn's grin was so arrogant Vaughn actually took a step forward, ready to raise his hand against him.

Milburn opened the billiard room door. A couple of heads turned their way, wondering who was about to enter.

"Careful, Darlington. I wouldn't want to see you thrown out of the house for brawling. Then no one would be there to comfort Miss Darby. Oh wait, *I* would. Go ahead, throw a punch."

With a low growl, Vaughn lowered his fist and forced a smile.

"You're hardly deserving of such attention. If you were any more beneath my notice, I'd have to check the bottom of my boot heel to find you." Before he could let Milburn antagonize him further, he went upstairs to his room.

It was going to be a long wait until midnight. He would have to distract himself from thoughts of making Milburn bleed, instead picturing how he would enjoy spending time with Perdita beneath the kissing boughs in the hidden alcove of the library.

Chapter 8

Perdita waited for her lady's maid to lay out her nightgown.

"Beth, would you be upset if I called you after midnight to undress me?"

Beth, a sweet girl with reddish-brown hair, glanced at her in surprise.

"Miss?" Beth never asked direct questions, but Perdita knew this was her maid's way of inquiring.

"You remember what I told you about Milburn?" Perdita had confessed her fears a few weeks before.

"I do." Beth took one of Perdita's dresses and smoothed out the wrinkles before carrying it to the tall armoire.

"Well, I am to have a secret rendezvous with Lord Darlington tonight."

"Miss..." Beth's tone was full of reprimand. Her maid could say so much with one word.

"I know you don't approve, but he is the only chance I see of escaping Milburn's interest. We're going to arrange for him to see us somehow. I hope that will dissuade him."

Beth gave a huff of disagreement.

Perdita placed her hands on her hips. "What is it?"

"Miss, there's no reason a man would want a secret rendezvous with you. Not unless he has a specific desire in mind."

"Beth, he doesn't *want* me, not in that way. Men like Darlington are excellent at playing the role of seducer, but that's all it is. Playacting. I paid my price to him by arranging a meeting with Lord Lennox after the New Year. That is all Darlington truly wants."

Her maid gave another disgruntled sound. "You are one of the sweetest and loveliest ladies I know, miss. He'd either be blind or a fool not to want you, and his eyesight seems to be just fine. I'm only asking you to take care. That's all."

"I promise." Perdita knew Vaughn had enjoyed their time in the

library and the woods, but she knew men like him. He could have his pick of ladies who knew what to do to please a man, and she could not possibly be interesting enough for him. Vaughn would have no designs upon her, not in the way her maid feared. She was a virgin, and he'd made it abundantly clear upon their first meeting that he didn't seduce "innocents," as he'd called them, yet he had said he might make an exception for her.

"I shall wait up for you," Beth said, clearly unconvinced.

"Go on to bed. If I need you, I'll come and wake you."

Her maid frowned. "You shouldn't have to come fetch me in the servants' quarters, miss."

"Stop worrying." Perdita shoved her out the door. "Go on to bed now."

When her servant was gone, she waited in her room, trying to pass the time until the appointed hour. She tried to read a book, but she couldn't focus. Finally, she left for the library ten minutes before midnight. She was nervous and excited, but it was only because she was engaging in her second midnight rendezvous, *not* because she was excited to see Vaughn again.

When she reached the library, she ducked inside and began to pace, her slippers wearing paths in the carpet by the fire. At the sound of the door opening she turned, an eager smile upon her lips which quickly faded when she saw who it was.

"Finally, we have a moment alone," said Samuel Milburn.

Perdita was afraid to move. Afraid to breathe. All she could think was that he'd once thrown a woman out a window and that she could meet the same dreadful end.

For a long moment, they simply stared at each other, like a cat watching a mouse frozen with fear. Then he walked toward her. Perdita was torn between the desire to run and to hold her ground. This was her house, by God. Who was he to menace her in it? And by the dark look in his eyes she sensed running would only make things worse—and things were already very bad indeed.

Her heart pounded inside her chest, but she tried to remain outwardly calm.

"Darlington will be here in a few minutes. It would be wise of you to leave." She took two slow, careful steps to place a tall armchair between herself and Milburn. The crackling fire and the ticking of the old clock above the marble mantle were strangely loud in the tense silence of the room.

Milburn wore no coat, and made a show of rolling the sleeves of his shirt up. It was intimidating, not that Perdita could explain why. If Vaughn had done the same action, she would not have been afraid but rather excited.

“When I am done with you, he won’t care. He certainly won’t *want* you any longer.” It was her only warning. Milburn lunged for her, and Perdita, too terrified to scream, simply acted. She shoved the chair at him. It wasn’t as heavy as it looked and it toppled over, striking him in the knees. He crumpled onto it with a violent shout.

Perdita raised her skirts and ran for the door. But something snatched her ankle, and she fell. When she tried to scramble to her feet, she was pulled back to the ground. Pain shot up her right leg. She kicked out instinctively, again and again.

“Stop that, you little bit—” The hoarse curse turned into a grunt of pain as her foot connected with Milburn’s face.

She had only a few precious seconds of freedom, but her palms, slick with sweat, found no purchase on the wooden floor.

“*Help!*” she screamed, but a heavy weight came down on top of her, crushing her into the floor. Air rushed out of her lungs, and a hand dug into her hair, lifted her head up, then shoved it hard on the ground. Her forehead struck the wood floor, dazing her.

“Little bitch. How *dare* you,” Milburn growled, his body pinning hers down. His other hand slid toward her skirts, dragging them up.

Perdita’s head throbbed in pain, and she couldn’t breathe and couldn’t move.

The library door was only ten feet away, but it might as well have been ten miles. Her eyes blurred with tears as the horror of what was happening sank in. She dug her nails into the wood, the scraping sound an undertone beneath Milburn’s growl as he jerked her skirts higher and panted.

The creak of the library door opening did not stop him, if he had noticed it at all, but Perdita raised her head at the sound, praying someone, *anyone* would see.

“Help—” She tried to shout again, but her lungs were crushed and her vision was tunneling. She couldn’t breathe.

There was a distant roar, as though coming deep from a well beneath layers of water, far away. The crushing pressure on her chest vanished, and her ears filled with the harsh, violent sounds of men shouting and furniture crashing.

She crawled toward a bookcase, using the wood to support her as she took shelter, guarding her head as she gasped for breath, her eyes closed. When the sounds stopped and she opened her eyes, she saw Vaughn had hold of Milburn’s shirt with one hand and was shaking the unconscious ruddy-faced bastard. When he seemed satisfied the other man was out cold, he dropped him onto the floor, then turned to her. His eyes were hard as diamonds, sharp and burning. His knuckles were covered in blood.

Perdita’s lips quivered, and a sob escaped her. His gaze softened,

and he rushed over to her, lifting her into his arms.

"My darling, my darling." He buried his face in her hair as he carried her out of the room. He walked hastily down the corridor and back up the stairs. "Which way is your room?" he asked.

"The last one on the left." She tucked her face against his throat, her body still shaking. He carried her to her bedchamber and set her down on her bed, then touched her face, lifting it so he could see her eyes. The anger had returned.

"There is something I must attend to. I will fetch your maid at once."

"No!" she said with a gasp. "I mean, please, do not wake her. She would only worry and ask questions that I'm not ready to answer."

"Are you sure?" Vaughn hesitated at the door. "Will you be all right to be left alone for a few minutes?"

She nodded. She didn't want Beth witnessing her shame and fear. She only wanted Vaughn. He made her feel safe.

"Good. I will return shortly." He placed a kiss upon her brow and left.

Perdita sat there on the edge of the bed and looked down. She was missing one slipper, her gown had been ripped in several places, and her forehead throbbed. She extended her ankle and whimpered at the sharp twist of pain she felt. A minute later, the door opened and her father came in, Vaughn behind him.

"Perdy?" Her father rushed to her side, hugging her. After he was certain she was in no immediate danger, he nodded at Vaughn. "Come. We'll take care of this right now."

She didn't know what they were talking about and was too distraught to ask.

They both left her alone again. When they returned, her mother was with them, and both Vaughn's and her father's boots were covered in fresh snow.

"Papa..." Perdita whispered.

"You're safe now," her father growled. Perdita exhaled, relief sweeping through her, but it didn't erase her humiliation or the pain she was in. Her mother came to her, hugging her fiercely, a stark look of fury and fear in her eyes that filled Perdita with guilt.

But then she remembered Milburn's threats. By tossing him out of the house, Vaughn and her father had given Milburn the excuse he needed to carry out his threats. Her father would soon be exposed for a crime Perdita was certain he was not guilty of. She covered her stomach with her hand as she endured a wave of nausea.

"Perdy, dear, are you all right?" her mother demanded. Then she spun on Vaughn. "What happened to her? What did you do?"

"Mama, please!" Perdita gasped. "He saved me from Milburn."

"What? Milburn? But that's not possible."

"I'm afraid it is," her father said. "Darlington and I just threw the bastard out into the snow."

"That is all?" Her mother's voice rose. "Reginald, you need to go out and find that man and shoot him. Do you understand me?"

"As much as I adore your thirst for vengeance, my dear, we cannot shoot a man in the back. Not even the local magistrate would allow that."

"Then shoot him in the front! The local magistrate be damned!" her mother snarled like a protective wolf.

"Darby, she needs a doctor. Can you send a lad to ride to the village? I'd go, but I will not leave her here alone." Vaughn approached the bed and gingerly cupped her cheek, trying to offer her a reassuring smile, but he faltered.

"Perdita..." For some reason that tenderness, *his* tenderness broke her last bit of strength that had kept up her composure. She burst into tears, slid away from her mother, and reached for him. He curled his arms around her body, delicately at first, before his hold tightened. The warmth of his chest and his dark masculine scent mixed with a hint of winter chill that clung to his clothes soothed her.

She knew her parents were speaking, but she didn't want to face them. Not yet. "Vaughn, make them go to bed, please. I don't want them to stay up and worry. I need to be alone."

He cleared his throat. "I understand, sweetheart." He let go of her and walked over to where her anxious parents stood. Perdita turned away and lay upon her bed, her face buried in the blankets.

"Leave her alone? With you? Absolutely not!" Perdita's mother hissed and came over to her by the bed so that Perdita couldn't avoid her gaze.

"Mama, I wish to be left alone. But I would feel safer if Lord Darlington remained with me."

"But..." Her mother struggled for words. "We have guests. It isn't..."

Perdita sat up and grasped her mother's hands. "I don't care one whit about scandal right now. He saved me from a man who deserves far worse from them. Let them wag their tongues about Milburn's actions, not Vaughn's."

Her mother's lip quivered, and she stared at Perdita for a long moment before she nodded. "Very well. You are engaged, after all..." Then she turned to Vaughn. "If you do anything..." Fury flashed in her mother's eyes.

"I won't." Vaughn's tone was completely serious. Perdita lay back down and closed her eyes, wishing for the humiliation and pain of this moment to end.

She heard the door close. The candles by the bed were snuffed out except for one, which remained close to her side of the bed.

"They are gone. If you decide at any moment that you wish them to return, I will fetch them at once. They will bring the doctor when he arrives, and you will see him for your injuries. I insist upon that." Vaughn's voice was firmer now. The natural command in his tone was a comfort. But she was afraid of his tenderness, afraid it came from a place of pity and not affection.

The tears coating her cheeks dried and made her skin tingle. Affection? She wanted Vaughn's affection? When had that become a concern?

"Perdita?" She flinched when he touched her shoulder. He moved his hand, and she immediately missed him.

She sniffed. "Vaughn, please don't pull away. I'm still rather jumpy after..." She couldn't face the awful horror of what almost happened. He stood beside the bed, his eyes glowing and his hair falling over them. His hands were still bloodied, and she realized his skin was broken in a few places.

She sat up and reached for his hands, catching them before he could pull them away. "You're hurt."

"It's only a scratch or two." He pulled his hands away from hers and walked over to the washbasin, dipping his hands into the water.

"Damn, it's cold," he muttered, and wiped his hands on the spare cloth beside the basin. When he turned to face her again, his grim expression made her stomach clench in anxious knots.

"What happened tonight with Milburn..." He paused, and she knew with dreadful certainty what he was going to say. So she decided to beat him to it.

"I understand. Milburn cannot possibly expect to take my hand now. You've done more than I asked. You are free to return to London. I will have my father announce the breaking of the engagement tomorrow."

He quirked one brow. "That is not what I was going to say." He took a step toward her, then halted as if rethinking his closeness.

"You weren't?" A silly girl's hope flooded through her. The bargain was over, and he had no reason to stay, even though she wanted him to.

"I was going to say that given everything that has happened, I think it's best if we see this through to its end." He looked down at his boots, his voice strangely quiet. "I brought a special license with me."

She wasn't sure what he meant, and her head was aching something fierce. "Vaughn, please, say what you mean." She touched her forehead. The spot where she'd hit the floor was still tender.

"We ought to marry. As soon as possible. Perhaps Christmas Day?

That would give you tomorrow, Christmas Eve, to plan a small ceremony at the local church.”

Perdita was speechless. Marriage? Was he serious? She had only just admitted to herself that she liked him.

“I know this is sudden and unexpected, but I believe it is a good solution. Milburn won’t stop, until you’re properly protected as the wife of a peer. Only then will you be safe. I fear, however, that it won’t stop him from hurting your father with his supposed evidence, but we shall weather the scandal together. I am no stranger to those.” There it was, her safety, his only reason for proposing a hasty marriage. Not because of love or even infatuation, but a simple desire to protect her.

Some ladies would find that chivalrous act enough reason to say yes, but not her. Whenever she had contemplated marriage, it had always been with one thought in mind—to marry for love. A great, all-consuming, passionate love whose flame would challenge even the stars.

“Shall I tell your parents you agree?” he asked.

The silence in the room grew until she felt once again she couldn’t breathe.

“No.”

He stared at her, his gaze inscrutable, before he began to chuckle wryly.

“You find it amusing that I’ve rejected you?” She sniffled, tears burning her eyes. She would not cry—*she would not*.

“I think it is, yes. I suppose it’s because I mistakenly believed that you bore some *tendre* for me. You don’t, do you?”

“I...” She *did* care about him, but that wasn’t why she’d refused him. It was because *he* didn’t care about her, not in the way she wanted. Her hesitation lit his eyes with a soft fire that left her speechless.

“So, you do care. How curious. What, pray tell, is holding you back then?” He eased down on the bed beside her. He looked so inviting, so charming at that moment, with his hair ruffled and his coat gone. She wanted nothing more than to crawl onto his lap and cover his face with kisses and forget the world outside the room. But she couldn’t, he didn’t care about her.

“Perdita, we can be honest with each other, can’t we?” he asked, cupping her chin gently and turning her face toward his. A tear trailed down her cheek. He caught the bit of moisture delicately with his finger, the way one would catch a dewdrop from a flower’s petal.

“You don’t...you don’t love me. And I understand. This was an arrangement meant to solve both our problems. But you go too far. I could never marry a man unless he loved me. Loved me madly. Loved

me to distraction. I deserve a great love. Even you deserve that. We cannot marry simply to afford me protection from Milburn. It is not reason enough."

Vaughn brushed the pad of his thumb over her cheek, his eyes a pair of dark sapphires.

"I do not know if I'm capable of love, but I care for you more than I have for any other woman. And that is no idle boast. When I'm with you, things seem sharper, clearer." He seemed to struggle with his words. "It was as though I was in a listless, hazy dream. When I first kissed you in London, I woke up, clear as a bell ringing in my ears. Everything seems more real, more true when I'm with you." He closed his eyes and shook his head. Then he leaned forward and pressed his forehead to hers, holding her face in his hands.

"I don't know *how* to love, if I am honest. But I don't want to stop this. It was always a charade for you, but it never was for me. I *always* wished to marry you."

She stared at him, pulling her face away from his, but only to see his expression more clearly. "What?"

"Yes. The night you came to my townhouse, I decided then that I wished to marry you."

"But..." How could he have made that decision then? It didn't seem possible.

"Take this chance with me," Vaughn said. "Say you will marry me. We need only the vicar at the church and a gown for you. I even have my wedding clothes ready. They're a tad old, I'm afraid, as I couldn't afford a new set." His face reddened at the confession.

Perdita's heart raced wildly again. Could she do this? Marry him on a leap of faith that he *might* one day love her?

"Answer one question."

"Ask it." He continued to stroke her cheek, the gesture sweet and soothing. How unlike the cold rake she'd believed him to be. Perhaps he could surprise her one day with love. He made her want to believe anything was possible.

She watched him carefully. "*Why* do you care for me? What makes me different from any other young heiress you could marry to satisfy your debts?"

Vaughn didn't pull away, but he didn't respond immediately, either. She searched his eyes for any hint of deception but saw only a flicker of hope. "I have had plenty of chances to marry others. Even a reputation such as mine does not scare away the most determined mothers with marriageable daughters or those looking for a tie to a title. Accepting your offer to participate in a false engagement, however, was never about your fortune. If you recall, my terms were to be introduced to Lennox in order to make my own fortune."

Perdita nodded. She couldn't forget or ignore that truth.

"That would have been enough for me. But I've been intrigued by you since I met you at the garden party in September. You had this cleverness about you, and when I learned that you write astronomy articles, well..."

"You know about that?" Her heart leapt into her throat.

"Of course, I do. The penmanship on the draft you showed me is very feminine, but I suspect you would alter that when you felt it was ready to present. I adore that you write, that you think, that you defy the role society has set for you. Do you have any idea how refreshing that is in a woman? I quite love that about you."

"Would you demand I stop if we married?" she asked quietly, hope and fear warring inside her.

"Stop? Heavens no. I'd encourage it. I've never wanted a normal life, let alone a normal wife. I want a woman who will not shy from trouble, who defies convention, who loves it when I tell her to be good in bed and trusts me to teach her about passion. You've always been the answer for me, Perdita. Don't you see? I could marry no one else *but* you."

He smiled then, that boyish smile she'd seen in the woods, the one that made her chest tighten and her head feel faint.

"You promise our marriage would be one that would not trap us both? I cannot agree to being trapped in a gilded cage."

"Nor could I. If there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that marrying you would be thrilling." He dropped his gaze to her lips, still smiling. "What's it to be?" he asked. "Give this rogue a proper chance? I swear I shall make an excellent husband once I'm reformed, and I quite welcome the challenge."

Perdita sniffed and smiled shyly. "This may be madness, but perhaps for once I should embrace it. I accept." She leaned in the same moment he did, and they kissed. It was a gentle kiss that burned slow and hot, despite the tender brush of lips and the tentative touch of hands upon skin.

When they finally parted, Vaughn carefully touched her forehead with his long, elegant fingers, scowling.

"I wanted to kill that man for what he did to you. I wanted to wring his bloody neck. I was so afraid..."

"I was too, but when I saw you come in the door, I knew you would save me." She crawled into his lap, and he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

"I never want you to feel that you need to be saved. But I vow to protect you, to always be there for you, sweetheart." His gently spoken promise made her heart flutter wildly. For the Devil of London to utter such words, it had to be a spell born of magic, the magic of

love she hoped for...someday.

At that moment the doctor knocked upon the door. Vaughn reluctantly set her down. She felt his hesitation to let her go. It made her feel warm all over.

“Come in,” she called.

Dr. Williams was a middle-aged man with a black bag, and his coat was dusted with snow. Perdita’s parents were behind him, both looking anxious.

“Could everyone wait outside, please?” the doctor asked. “You too, lad.”

Vaughn didn’t leave the bed until she nodded at him. He joined her parents outside, and the doctor set his bag down on the table by the bed.

“There now. Let’s take a look at your head first, Miss Darby.”

Chapter 9

Vaughn wore a path in the Persian rugs covering the floor of the hallway, barely aware that Perdita's parents were watching his every step. On either side of him, paintings of happy lovers seemed to mock him with their innocence.

Mr. Darby fixed him with a formidable gaze. "Darlington, I sense there's more to tonight's events than Milburn suddenly accosting my daughter. I believe you know what's happening, and you had better tell me."

Vaughn took in a deep breath. He stopped pacing. Just beyond her parents, Vaughn could see heavy drapes drawn over the windows to keep out the cold. He stared at them for a long moment, focusing his thoughts before he finally spoke.

"How much do either of you know about Samuel Milburn?"

"Oh, not much," Perdita's mother said, her brows knitting. "He's well set up, and the *ton* seems to approve of him. The society pages paint him as a generous and eligible bachelor. I had no reason to know he was..." She didn't continue, but her eyes blurred with tears.

"I admit I didn't do much asking," said Perdita's father. "I figured if Perdita told me she was interested in him, then I would start asking questions." Darby suddenly paled. "She mentioned... Oh God, she said something about him having a cruel streak, but I didn't listen."

Vaughn crossed his arms over his chest. "Let me tell you what sort of man he is, then. Milburn is a brute and a coward. He killed one of his mistresses, though no one can prove it wasn't an accident. But he bragged about it in the gambling hells. He likes to hurt ladies, force them to his will, break them in ways I will not speak of. That is what he tried to do tonight to your daughter. And he was trying to force your daughter into marriage by threatening you."

"Me?" Mr. Darby looked as if an assassin might pop out at any moment.

"He claims to have documents that prove you have been involved

in smuggling goods into the country and he threatened to take that proof to the local magistrate.”

Mrs. Darby covered her mouth, her complexion paling. Perdita’s father put an arm around her shoulders.

“Breathe, Minerva. Just breathe.” He patted her shoulder, keeping a tight hold as he met Vaughn’s gaze. “That’s utter nonsense. I haven’t been involved in any such...” Darby struggled for words.

Vaughn nodded. “I believe you. We think he is working with your investment partners, arranging for you to take the blame for their illegal acts. Perdita feared Milburn and his evidence so much she came to me at my home in London and beseeched me to enter into a false engagement with her. As you may know, I have a somewhat unscrupulous reputation in certain circles. She hoped that an engagement to me would scare Milburn off. Unfortunately, our charade only made the bastard furious enough to attack her. In his twisted mind, he already owned her.”

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Darby spoke for several seconds.

“But... Are you saying you *aren’t* going to marry her then?” Mrs. Darby finally asked.

“Far from it. A true affection has grown between us, and she has agreed to proceed with the wedding without false pretenses. Milburn won’t dare come after her if I’m there to protect her.”

“Why does he want to hurt her? I still don’t understand,” Mrs. Darby said. “Why didn’t he simply blackmail my husband directly? We have plenty of money. He could have demanded we pay him off. Why go after our daughter?”

“Why indeed? That is why I believe the evidence to be false. You would not pay a man off for fabricating a lie.”

Mr. Darby nodded at this. “I wouldn’t pay him a half penny for such a thing.”

“But how could your daughter possibly ask if such a scandalous accusation was true or not? And what if you denied it and she had doubt? That fear is what Milburn preyed on. Sometimes the thought of a misdeed can hold more power than the proof.”

Darby shared a knowing look with Vaughn before he continued.

“But it goes beyond that. Do you know the sort of man who buys a spirited horse because he likes to break the beast? He takes pleasure in destroying its spirit and ruining it until it’s a mindless, frightened scrap of horseflesh.”

Mrs. Darby nodded. Everyone knew that kind of man, a man who would kick a helpless pup or slap a woman for raising her eyes at him. Cruelty was the shield of many cowards.

“He’s such a man?” she asked Vaughn. “He saw my daughter’s spirit and fire, and he wanted to crush it?”

Vaughn sighed and nodded. "If we can save Perdita from him, then all we need to worry about is Milburn's supposed proof. Even if it is fabricated, he may intend to harm your good name."

Darby clenched his fists. "We can handle that. I'm not so foolish as my partners believe."

"And you, Lord Darlington?" Mrs. Darby asked. "Are you the sort of man to hurt a woman like my daughter?"

"I would sooner end my own life. Perdita's fire and spirit draw me to her. I feel alive in ways I haven't felt in years. It would be an honor to take such a woman as my wife. That is why I offered to marry her. And it's why she accepted. We wish to marry on Christmas Day. I already have the special license and hoped you could both help us arrange the ceremony." A flutter of nerves bubbled up inside him as he waited to see how her parents would react to this.

Mrs. Darby sputtered. "But...that's the day after tomorrow."

"It is, but I see no reason to delay, only to make haste."

Mr. and Mrs. Darby glanced at each other.

"You haven't given us...*reason* to rush this, have you?" Darby asked.

Vaughn shook his head. "My concerns are regarding Milburn only. We've not gone so far in our passions for there to be cause for worry." He admitted this bluntly, smiling a little. "It would seem she draws out the gentleman in me."

"Good. Or I might've tossed you out in the snow as well," Perdita's father replied.

The door to the bedchamber opened. The doctor came out, closing his bag. The silver clasps clicked into place, and he faced them all, his face etched with worry.

"How is she, Henry?" Mr. Darby asked.

"A little shaken up. Her headache was fairly strong. I've given her a bit of a sleeping draught and bound her ankle to keep it from being turned again. She doesn't wish to sleep alone, and she is still anxious. I was told she was attacked?"

"Yes," Darby said. "The gentleman guilty of that act has been cast out of this house."

"Good. She did not say if..." The doctor flushed. "How far the attack went."

Vaughn understood what he wasn't saying. "I stopped him before he could harm her in that fashion."

The doctor's shoulders sagged with relief. "Good. You are Lord Darlington, I take it?" Vaughn nodded. "She wishes to see you again. I asked if she wished to have her maid sent for, but she has declined. She only wants Lord Darlington."

"Thank you." Vaughn walked past him to enter Perdita's

bedchamber, but he paused in the doorway, staring at her father.

"I will stay the night with her. On my honor, my intentions are pure."

Darby stared at him and nodded. "Very well." He held his hand out to the doctor. "Let me see you to a room upstairs, unless you wish to ride home."

"Thank you. I think I will stay the night." The doctor followed Perdita's father down the hall. Only Perdita's mother lingered.

"Tell me you will love her," she said earnestly. "After hearing what might have become of my daughter, I need to hear it."

"I've never been in love, madam," he replied solemnly. "But if there was ever someone worthy of my heart, it is she. Although I doubt I'm worthy of hers."

For a moment, he saw Perdita clearly in her mother's face. Had he really thought she was once a silly woman? Now he saw her as her daughter and husband did. A caring mother, a loving wife, a woman who wanted what was best for her child.

"That's not exactly the answer I wished to hear."

"I know," he replied with a soft smile. "But you deserve the truth."

"Do you really believe I'll let you go in there with my daughter and spend the night after admitting you do not love her?" the lady challenged.

Vaughn paused with his hand on the door latch. "I admit to not feeling love; that does not mean I feel nothing. I am fond of her, so much so that I would pledge myself to her protection even if her heart belonged to another. She is frightened and ashamed of what happened to her, afraid that Milburn will come for her. I've seen women in her condition. They jump at every shadow. Even if you stayed with her and locked the door, she would not feel truly safe. I, on the other hand, will sit in a chair with a pistol aimed at the door all night if that is what is required."

Mrs. Darby studied him hard, but at last she relented. "Very well. But if you hurt her..."

"Yes, I know. Your husband has mentioned my being buried where none shall find me on more than one occasion." Vaughn offered her a wry smile before he slipped into the room and closed the door behind him.

He wished he could have said he loved Perdita, but he still didn't know what being in love was like. He'd loved his brother, Edward. The love for a brother was a fierce love, a love that had rough edges and a toughness about it. Love for a woman was...well, it had to be different. He sensed that truth in his bones. It wasn't lust, and it wasn't friendship. What was it?

I want to love her. I want so badly what Gareth and Ambrose have

found with their wives.

But the truth was he was afraid his heart was so hardened by his life that it could never soften enough to open up for another soul.

He studied her room before he faced her. He had been far too focused on her to notice anything before.

A telescope stood close to a set of French windows that opened onto a balcony. His little secret scientist and her tools. Half a dozen pillows were on the bed or chairs, and when he studied one more closely, he noticed the needlework showed familiar shapes. Constellations. The stitch work wasn't flawless by any means, and he suspected that she spent her time better by penning essays than practicing with a needle and thread. Rather than a dainty escritoire, she had a large desk covered in charts and writings.

Perdita lay on the bed, her eyes half-open, still glassy from the sleeping draught the doctor had given her. Around her, the bed hangings of a soft rose silk brocade with leafy patterns made her look like a princess half-asleep in her bed.

"Vaughn, you will stay, won't you? I'm afraid of even the shadows."

He came over to the bed and brushed the hair back from her cheek. "I'm going to stay. We should get you changed. Can you sit up?"

She struggled to sit up, and he knelt at her feet and removed her remaining slipper. Then he slid his hands up her skirts, removing her stockings. She placed her hands on his shoulders to keep her balance when she stood. He stroked her legs gently, and then he had her turn to face the bedpost. She did so without question while he unfastened the buttons down the back of her gown. And then it fell to the floor. Then she tugged her petticoats down, revealing a perfect set of hips and rounded behind.

"Almost done," he promised, eyeing her stays. He took care to unlace them gently and not tug too hard so she didn't lose her breath. Then they too fell to the ground. She stepped out of them, wearing only the loose chemise that came down to her knees. Vaughn pulled back the bedclothes and urged her to get under the covers. She sighed and curled up against her pillow, her hair falling in loose tumbles over it. He plucked the pins out of her hair one by one, then gently massaged her scalp to make sure there were no pins left.

Perdita sighed. "For the Devil of London, you have turned out to be quite an angel."

"Am I?" he asked. The Devil of London. That nickname had always amused him. Given his choice of bed play, added to his reputation at the gambling tables, the *ton* had awarded him the unfortunate moniker.

“Yes.” She reached behind her to catch his arm and pulled him into the bed. “Lie with me.”

It was a command. Her eyes locked with his, and even though her gaze was soft and a little distant from the draught she’d taken, he saw the glint of determination to get her way.

He wasn’t about to ignore it. He removed his boots and slipped in the bed behind her. He curled one arm around her waist, tucking her against him.

“Don’t I scare you? You should be afraid of all men after what happened.” He wasn’t sure why he asked it, knowing the answer could be crushing.

She was quiet, her breathing slow. She wasn’t afraid of him. “Not all men are the same. And not all men saved me. Milburn is a monster. You...? You are my white knight.”

“I am no white knight, as much as I wish I could be. I’m afraid my armor is tarnished rather than shining.”

Perdita stroked his cheek with delicate fingertips, her eyes grave. “A knight in shining armor is a man whose metal has never been tested. And you have proven more than once just how strong your *mettle* is.”

Her words made his heart clench tight and she didn’t miss his play on metal and mettle. How could she know just the thing to say that made him feel both cut open and exposed, yet unafraid? Vaughn closed his eyes and sighed before he spoke again. “What can I do? Tell me and I will do *anything* for you.”

“Are you sure? You might not like what I ask.”

Vaughn expected some vow of vengeance against Milburn—which he would be happy to oblige. “Anything.”

“Then I wish to *know* you.”

That caught Vaughn short, and he wasn’t sure he was prepared for it. “Know me?”

“If we are to be married, I wish to know everything about you. I wish to know the man, not just the persona he woos women with.” She rolled over in his arms, and he could see her face, accented by winter moonlight.

His heart pounded. Would she even *like* such a man? One who was simply a person to her and not doing and saying the things he knew she wanted to hear? “What do you want to know about me?”

“Tell me something wonderful. Something that you cling to when the shadows threaten to drown you.” She put one hand to his jaw, her fingers exploring along his skin. Her touch burned in a wonderful way that made his heart skip.

“Something wonderful...” He would say this moment, but she was searching for his past. Something that revealed the true Vaughn to

her. He swallowed thickly, knowing the memory he would share with her.

"I had a brother, Edward, who was older than me by five years."

"I didn't know you had a brother." Her eyes, dark in the room, seemed to channel the thin glow of the moonlight from the window, like two pools frosted with ice, yet her gaze wasn't cold. It made him feel warm to have such intensity focused on him.

"Edward was...well, perfect, and I mean that in the best way. He was intelligent, amusing, generous—he was simply the *best*. Our parents were drawn to him, as the eldest and the favored. But I didn't hate him or the long shadow his life cast over mine. Far from it—he made me happy to be me, just Vaughn, Edward's little brother. We would go riding in the late summer, just the two of us, racing through the glens. He *always* let me win. Even when my gelding threw a shoe once, he stopped his horse, walked back to me, and announced I had beaten him. That was exactly the sort of man he was. And I could never measure up to that." His voice caught on the last few words, and he didn't speak for a moment.

Perdita's fingers stilled on his throat, and he felt her tremble. "What happened to him?"

Vaughn tried to smile. "Let's leave it at that. You asked for something wonderful, after all."

"I asked to know everything about you. Good and bad. What happened?"

Vaughn's throat felt like he had swallowed shards of glass. "He went riding alone one day. I was only sixteen at the time. I was away at Eton, and he was tending to the estate. He was thrown from his horse and died from the fall."

He shut his eyes, holding Perdita close, clinging to her as pain that he'd buried long ago clawed its way up. He remembered receiving the letter at his rooms in Eton. His mother's spidery handwriting on the parchment was blotted with tears as she'd informed him Edward had died. His heart, whatever had still been open to life and love, had turned to stone that day.

"You loved him dearly," she said.

"I did." He dared not open his eyes, because the treacherous tears would cling to his lashes.

"That means you *can* love, Vaughn. It means that someday you might even love *me*." She brushed one finger over his lips, as though memorizing the shape and the feel of them.

A strange tremor ran through Vaughn. He thought back on each kiss he'd stolen from her, how she'd returned that fire, but it had always seemed like something *more* in a way he couldn't describe. To hear her speak of love, of hoping that someday he would love her, he

realized then that she was telling him that *she* loved him. It was frightening and exciting, and he didn't know what to do except hold on to her and breathe as emotions ran riotously through him.

In that moment, he knew that if he lost Perdita, he would never recover, never come back from such devastation.

"Sleep now. I am here to watch over you." He kissed her brow, and she tucked herself tighter against him. All would be well. He had to believe that.

Chapter 10

Perdita did not wake until midday. The bed was empty, but the imprint where Vaughn had lain was still warm to the touch. She had been so tired after taking the sleeping draught, but she hadn't forgotten what he'd told her about his brother, about loving and losing him. She had seen the pain in his eyes and heard the catch in his voice. Her viscount's heart was not made of stone or even ice. It was there, beating and bleeding, just like her own.

She climbed out of bed, wincing at the stiffness of her muscles. It was going to be a long day, and tonight was the supper and the ball, which meant she'd have little time for rest. She lifted her head when her maid came in.

Beth came over and gave her a gentle hug. "My lady. I was told about last night by your mother. I am so sorry! Why didn't you send for me?"

"It's all right, Beth." She patted Beth's back before she released her. "I didn't wish to wake you, and honestly...I wanted to be left alone after what happened." She wouldn't admit to Beth that she'd been ashamed of being attacked and that she'd felt foolish.

Her maid stared at her before she spoke, as though she understood Perdita's feelings. "I do wish you had sent for me. I wouldn't have..." Beth struggled for words. "You're *my* lady, and I would have done anything to help you." The maid hugged her again. Perdita's eyes pricked with tears as she patted the girl's back.

"Thank you, Beth." For a long moment, neither of them spoke, but when Beth straightened, Perdita had banished her fear and was acting as normal as possible.

"I've been given strict orders that you are to remain off your feet, miss, except for dinner. And you are not allowed under *any* circumstances to dance."

"But—"

"Not one step." Beth began to lay out a fresh dress and slippers. It

was a white gown.

"Please, not that one. Surely I can at least choose what I wear."

Beth gave her a challenging stare. "And just *which* gown did you expect to wear?"

"I was hoping to wear my blue gown, the one with the white roses on the bodice and sleeves. I wish to wear a new gown, and it will help me stand out among the other ladies who will likely wear white, red, or green to celebrate Christmas Eve."

"Very well, the blue one. But no dancing," Beth commanded.

Perdita rolled her eyes and let her maid help her get dressed. She discovered a small purple bruise on her face that she would try to hide with her hair. It would be difficult, though. She hoped no one would notice.

An hour later, she was walking to the kitchens, hoping to steal a few biscuits. She'd had no appetite early this morning, but now she was feeling more like herself at last and was a bit peckish. She was shocked to see Vaughn join her at the stairs leading down to the kitchen.

"How are you?" he asked. He put one hand on the small of her back. Despite the layers of fabric between them, she could feel the heat of his palm through it all.

She ducked her head, embarrassed to face him with the bruise so visible on her face. "Well enough."

Vaughn stopped at the bottom of the stairs and cupped her chin, lifting her face up to face his.

"Damn," he cursed softly. "It looked less dark earlier this morning before I left."

This morning. So he had left just before she'd woken and kept his promise to stay the night with her.

"It is fine. I'm just afraid to let any of the guests see. Scandal and gossip travel so fast."

"That it does." He touched her hips with his hands, the hold gentle but firm. "Why don't we meet in the library in one hour? I have a plan."

"I was going to fetch something to eat."

"I will take care of it. Now go rest and meet me in the alcove. One hour."

"All right." She lifted her skirts to go back upstairs, but he captured her arm, halting her so that he could steal a deep kiss, and then he released her. Breathless, she stood there for a moment, her body hot enough that she wanted to run out into the snow to cool herself. Then he headed down the corridor to the kitchens, and she went back up to her chamber, wondering what he had planned.

She had her answer an hour later when she tiptoed into the library.

She gasped.

Vaughn stood on the edge of the window seat, seeing to the hanging of a large kissing bough. At his feet on the floor was a large blanket with plates of food and a pitcher of lemonade with two glasses. Several books were in a neat stack by the blankets and pillows arranged against the wall. He'd created a picnic for just the two of them.

What man would take such time and effort to produce a lovely little scene such as this? It was utterly charming. She sniffed as her eyes burned. The blow to her head made her feel quite silly. It did not escape her notice that he had taken a room she loved, a room where something terrible had happened, and made it feel like a safe place again. And to think he believed he wasn't a gentleman...

He still had his back to her, and she admired the lean lines of his legs and the firmness of his backside in his dark-blue trousers. He was not wearing knee britches, but he would change later when he went to the ball...without her. She was going to miss dancing with him, miss dancing in general until her ankle healed and the doctor thought she could chance a quadrille or two.

"You've outdone yourself," she said as she reached the picnic blanket.

Vaughn flashed a brilliant smile as he climbed down from the window seat. They both stood beneath the kissing bough now. Outside the snow glittered on the lawns, painting a pretty winter picture that made her heart leap.

He nodded at the bit of greenery that would no doubt lead to something very wicked. "Care to put it to use?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea." She stood up on tiptoe to curl her arms around his neck. At the same moment he lifted her up by the waist and kissed her. His lips were soft yet gentle as he explored her mouth. Perdita gave in to the exquisite taste of him and the heat of his body. He made her forget her worries. Surely that made him perfect.

When their lips parted, he stared at her in wonder.

"What is it?"

"You." He brushed the backs of his knuckles over her cheek. "Even after what Milburn tried to do to you, you can stand here and kiss me. You're astonishing."

A flutter of panic rose in her at his words. Did he think her wanton or unaffected by last night?

"Whatever you are thinking, stop," he said. "What I meant is that few women would be as brave as you to even be alone with a man after what happened."

She lowered her gaze to the floor. "What happened to me... That doesn't make me weak. It doesn't make me less."

“Yes,” he agreed. “You are strong. You always have been.”

She raised her gaze to his, hoping she would see no condemnation in his eyes.

“And that strength makes you astonishing.” He feathered his lips over hers in a light, sweet, tender kiss that made her knees weak. For a man who claimed he could not love, he could kiss like one who loved more than the most romantic of poets.

“Would you like to sit down? We may have our picnic, even if it is a little bit late.” Vaughn helped her down on the blanket and began to serve the cold cuts and the fruit he’d brought up from the kitchen.

“Vaughn, when we are married, are we to move into your townhouse?” she asked. It was strange to think she was to be married so soon, to the Devil of London, no less. It was equally strange to think that the *ton* had favored Milburn as a gentleman and condemned Vaughn in the same breath, yet society couldn’t have been more wrong about both men.

At least my devil is really an angel in disguise.

“We could, unless you wish to move to a different residence.” He answered carefully, his words measured. “I’ve had to close up the country estate.” He didn’t say it, but she knew what he wasn’t saying. That he wouldn’t use her money to reopen the estate unless she allowed him to use her money for such a purpose.

She took a drink of her lemonade and looked at him.

“Last night when you spoke of Edward, I sensed you were unhappy. I want you—*us*—to be happy. What if we used some of my dowry to open up your country home? If we are able to fill your tenant farms again, we could have some success at creating a sustainable estate. I admit, I prefer the country to London and would enjoy living in the house where you grew up, if you wish.” For them and the children she hoped would come. She had never been interested in children before, but when she looked at Vaughn and pictured children with his golden hair and blue eyes...she wanted them desperately.

“If you don’t mind, I would like that. But I assure you, once my investments with Lennox bear fruit, I will restore the money we used to your accounts. People will talk, of course, when we move to the estate. They’ll say my marrying you was only to improve my family’s name and my circumstances.” Heavy regret layered his tone, and it softened her heart even further.

“Let them talk.” She met his gaze. “It is nothing we haven’t heard said of a hundred others. You and I know the truth of what lies between us.”

She pushed her plate off the blanket and held out a hand to him. The afternoon sun from the window bathed them both as they sat next

to each other on the floor by the window seat.

Vaughn placed his hand in hers, and she pulled gently on his arm. He raised his brows in a silent question. She grinned. There was one thing she wanted more than anything right now. Him. She knew he would have to be tempted after everything that had happened, and she would do whatever she must to convince her gentlemanly rogue to claim what was his. She wanted to erase the bad memories here and cover them with new ones. But more than that, she wanted to be with Vaughn. Not because she wanted to get over Milburn's attack, but because she'd wanted Vaughn before, before all this had happened.

I will not let Milburn take my happiness or my passions from me. I can love and make love without his specter haunting me.

"Tomorrow we are to be married. You have been the perfect gentleman, but I don't want a gentleman right now. I want you, my dangerous rogue, to do what you do best. *Seduce me.*"

His blue eyes darkened, and he crawled over to her as she lay back on the blanket.

"Are you sure? After..." He hesitated, afraid to say the word.

"What Milburn tried to do will not define me, and it hasn't changed how I feel about you."

His lips twitched in a wicked fashion. "Anyone could come in and see us," he warned as he leaned over her prone body.

"They could. But everyone is busy preparing for the dance tonight. Since I'm not allowed to dance, I would much rather be here with you right now, like this."

His wolfish grin made her heart skip. "A wicked lady for a wicked lord—I do believe we are *perfectly* matched." He unbuttoned his waistcoat as she helped him remove his shirt. She flattened her palms over the smooth, sculpted planes of his chest and the corded muscle of his stomach. She clenched her thighs together as a wave of heat rolled through her lower body.

"I want to strip you out of that gown, but we cannot risk it." He lowered himself on top of her. She tucked her skirts up, and he settled between her parted thighs. He stroked one hand down her right leg, playing with the ribbons of her garter. Then he slid his hand between their bodies, touching her between her thighs. She jolted at the press of his fingers. She was so aroused, so ready for more, that she tensed against the slight intrusion.

"It will hurt a little," he warned. His eyes blazed with a fire that echoed her own body, and she nodded.

"I know, but I want you." She lifted her hips in encouragement, and he began to kiss her lips and her throat before she felt him fumble with his trousers and shift above her. Something hot and hard nudged at her entrance. She tightened her legs on his hips, trying to draw him

closer.

"I am ready," she whispered against his mouth.

Vaughn thrust. In one blinding moment of pain, she welcomed him into her body, and he stilled above her, his breathing hard.

"That's it, darling. Breathe with me." He kissed her gently as he began to rock inside her.

The pain blurred into something different, something sharp, yet not painful. It was a building pleasure. He moved his hips, pulling in and out of her more quickly. The sensation was almost too much to bear. Her breasts ached as they pushed tightly against her bodice.

"Vaughn, it's happening again." Her body burned all over like it was kissed with fire. His lips captured hers, his arms braced on either side of her shoulders. He rose above her, all muscle and power. Yet there was no fear, only pleasure as it ripped through her. She cried out against him and he joined her, harshly cursing as they both went limp.

Every muscle that ached from last night's ordeal was now relaxed. She couldn't have imagined that making love would be so calming once it was done.

"How do you feel, darling?" Vaughn asked, his blue eyes touching upon her face as he searched her gaze.

She sighed and lifted her head, kissing him. "Wonderful."

"Just imagine how much better it will be on a bed, when I can take hours exploring you, my mouth and hands touching secret places on your body."

"Hours?" Lord, she couldn't fathom that.

"Hours," he repeated in a low whisper. "And it will make you so exhausted you won't be able to leave our bed."

Our bed. Those two simple words wrapped her heart in a cocoon of warmth.

"We could stay here," she whispered. "Forget dinner and the ball. Let's stay right here." She ran her hands up his arms, relishing the way his muscles felt beneath her fingers. The sunlight created a wild halo of gold as it hit his hair, and she ran her fingers through the burnished strands. The ruby stone of her ring gleamed a dark blood red, like a pulsing heart.

"Is that what you desire, to hide away? Not that you need any excuse after what you've endured. We've plenty of books, but we shall need more food. I'll get dressed and go down to the kitchens, shall I?"

"Yes, please."

He pulled away from her, and they both straightened their clothes. She helped him button his waistcoat, and then he left her alone. She settled into a window seat, her body languid. She could stay here just like this for an age, watching the sun glint off the snow in the gardens. Fresh snow. They'd had more early this morning.

She studied the snow, then leaned carefully against the glass to get a better look. There were footprints...leading right up to the windows of the house one floor below. None of the servants would be outside, not so close to the house. But who would be prowling about in the snow, peering into windows? Only one name came to mind.

Milburn.

He was still here. She would have to tell Vaughn.

Chapter 11

Perdita stared at the steps leading down to the coach that would carry her to the small church in Lothbrook. She couldn't ignore the flutter in her belly. In a few hours she would be wife to the Devil of London.

"I cannot believe you are getting married!" Her best friend, Alexandra Worthing, stood next to her, a puzzled look on her beautiful face. "Nor can I believe *who* you are marrying."

Once the rest of society heard the news, she knew she would be flooded with letters from all of her friends and acquaintances, desperate to hear how such a match came about. It would be exhausting to tell everyone.

For a brief moment, she considered reaching out to Lady Society, the infamous mystery woman who penned gossip columns in the *Quizzing Glass Gazette*. That might be a way to tell London the story in a way that would allow Perdita to enjoy her honeymoon without an endless deluge of inquiries.

"I know. But it feels right," Perdita answered. She shifted her bouquet and finally addressed the unspoken tension between her and her friend. "Are you angry with me? For marrying Darlington? I know after what he did, kidnapping you, that you must despise him..."

Perdita swallowed whatever else she had planned to say. In some ways, Alexandra probably viewed Vaughn the way Perdita viewed Milburn, though Vaughn had never planned on forcing himself on Alex. It had all been for show to win a wager. But she felt she was betraying Alex somehow by marrying him, and the thought was breaking her heart.

"I..." Alex glanced down at her boots. "I am surprised, I admit. I didn't think he would be good enough for you. I'm still not convinced he is, but if you love him and he loves you..."

"He does," Perdita said, though she wasn't sure it was true, at least not yet.

“Then that is all that really matters, not what I think of him.” Alex tightened her cloak and held out her hands to Perdita in a way they’d always done as girls. It was a sign of friendship, a sign of trust. Perdita grasped her hands, the bouquet caught between them as they stared at each other.

“It is your wedding day,” Alex said with a broad smile. “And our husbands are good friends. Today is a happy day.”

“It is,” Perdita agreed. “Darlington and I are so happy you came.”

“Of course! I had a letter from your mother the moment you told her of your engagement. I’m only sorry we weren’t here sooner. Worthing would have helped Darlington drag that bastard out into the snow and drawn his cork!”

“Alex!” Perdita tried not to laugh at her friend’s bloodthirsty words.

Alex pointed one booted foot in a ladylike way. “He deserves far worse,” she grumbled.

“Yes, he does.” For the tenth time that day, she glanced around but saw only her footmen and the coach. It didn’t take away the sense she was being watched. She’d told Vaughn yesterday of her fears that Milburn hadn’t returned to London. He had vowed to keep a vigil on her at all times, and it was only with her insistence that he even agreed to leave her to go to the church first.

“Come on, Perdy, we mustn’t delay.” Alex took her arm, and they walked down to the coach and climbed in. Her father came out of the house and joined them, grinning.

“Nothing like a Christmas wedding, eh?” he asked.

Perdita smiled back. What a wonderful day to be married.



Vaughn felt the weight of his pistol tucked securely into a pocket

of his cloak as he walked up the steps of the small gray stone church. Greenery hung over the doorway and covered many of the pews that lined the aisle leading to the altar. Many of the villagers of Lothbrook were waiting in the pews, wearing their finest Christmas clothing. Everyone had come, it seemed, to witness the wedding.

My wedding. He smiled a little as he removed his cloak, careful to keep the pistol secure as he handed it to his valet, who took it to the front row near the altar and set it down. It was his only protection in case Milburn decided to show up. After Perdita confessed she’d seen

footprints outside of the house alongside the windows, he feared Milburn was still somewhere in the village waiting for them.

He'd tried to calm her concerns, but the truth was Perdita was more correct in her fears than she knew.

His butler, Mr. Craig, had arrived the day before with news. Mr. Craig had used his cunning and his contacts from days before to track down Darby's investment partners. After making some inquiries down by the docks, he ransacked their offices during the night and found a couple of hidden ledgers, dating back to several years prior to Darby's involvement. No doubt whatever falsified documents Milburn possessed had used these as their template, with the dates changed accordingly.

Craig had taken the documents to the local magistrate, and the investment partners involved had been taken into custody for further review. Milburn no longer held any power over Perdita, fabricated or not, and the scandal that had broken over London would inevitably ensnare the vile man and ruin his reputation as well. Milburn would be out for blood.

"Stop fidgeting," Ambrose muttered in his ear. "Don't want the bride-to-be to notice you're afraid."

Vaughn swallowed a laugh. When his best friend, Ambrose, had arrived with his new wife, it had been a blessing that Vaughn had never expected. He had almost destroyed their friendship by kidnapping Alex to win a wager. For his friend to be here today, on his wedding day... A thousand words were on the tip of Vaughn's tongue, but he was too ashamed to speak any of them.

"All will be well," Ambrose said, as though he could read the pain and regret in Vaughn's heart.

"Thank you," he whispered. Ambrose nodded, smiling.

The vicar, in his Christmas vestments, waited beside Vaughn. They both stared at the door, listening for the rattle of a coach on the cobblestones, the one carrying his bride-to-be.

"Worried she'll run?" The vicar, a man in his early twenties, chuckled. "Don't be. I've known Miss Darby since I was a lad. There's nothing that will stop her when she wants something. And from what I hear, she wants *you*." The man's eyes twinkled, and Vaughn relaxed.

She did indeed want him, just as he wanted her. The previous evening, he and Perdita had spent hours in the library, reading to each other and making love. It was worth the risk of being discovered to show her how proficient he could be. And she had been perfect. *Wonderfully perfect.*

And now he would join his life to hers before God. For the first time, he understood the strange condition his friend Ambrose had fallen prey to.

Love—love brought on by sheer joy. He never would've imagined he would feel this way. Not after the heartbreak of his brother's death.

The doors opened, and Perdita came into the church wearing a white silk gown. It was simple but elegant, just as she was. She bit her lip as she walked toward him, and he realized she was trying to hide a smile. Mr. Darby led her to him and kissed her cheek before he took his place in the front pew.

The vicar began the ceremony, and Vaughn struggled to hear the words of the vows and sacraments. All he could think about was how he'd bared his soul to this woman beside him and how she had worked her way into his heart with her cleverness and sweetness. His life was now divided into life before her and life with her.

At last he was given permission to kiss her, something he did without hesitation. She giggled against his lips, and they moved to the vestry to sign the register. Then he took his cloak from his valet and she took hers from her maid, and they prepared to meet their guests on the steps of the church.

Mr. Craig stood close by, his cool eyes and weathered face taking in the quaint scene of the Christmas town. Vaughn nodded at him. The older man appeared haughty and aloof to most, but to Vaughn he was a trusted ally, and he was glad Mr. Craig had been able to attend the wedding.

"Are you ready to go?" Perdita asked, eyes bright with mischief.

"I am. Quite ready, that is, to get you flat on your back on a bed." He whispered this so that none of the guests around them could hear.

"Wicked man!" she chastised, but her cheeks had already flushed. He couldn't help but notice how her breasts pressed against the bodice of her gown as she inhaled. Soon he would be exploring every bit of her body with intimate pleasure.

Vaughn was so lost in thoughts of his honeymoon and the coming feast he was distracted as they left the little church. People gathered around them, shaking hands and congratulating. It wasn't until the crowd thinned Vaughn realized something terrible was unfolding.

Samuel Milburn stood in the cobblestone street, disheveled and wild. He stared at them on the steps.

"You've ruined everything!" Milburn shouted and raised his arm. Light glinted off the pistol as he took aim at Perdita.

Vaughn never understood what his father had meant when he'd spoken of a soldier's instincts until that moment. He acted without thought and stepped in front of his wife. The pistol fired, and Vaughn grunted as the bullet struck.

Pain, sharp at first, then dulling to a heavy ache, but he found himself unable to even utter a curse. Around him everyone was screaming, yet Vaughn kept Perdita pressed safely behind him, even

as he stumbled and fell. He struggled to pull his weapon from his cloak as Milburn produced a second pistol.

Mr. Craig stepped forward, pressing Vaughn behind him. "Pardon me, my lord," he growled and raised his own pistol, firing at Milburn.

The man fell to his knees and landed facedown in the snow, a red pool of blood seeping into the snow around him on either side, his weapon cocked and still gripped in his hand. For a second no one moved. Then Mr. Craig tucked his empty pistol into his coat and turned back to Vaughn.

"Terribly sorry, sir. But your wound would have hampered your aim."

"Good man." Vaughn chuckled and then winced. "Good man." He'd always been glad his butler had a very particular set of skills, and today those skills had saved him and his wife.

His butler nodded solemnly.

Perdita fell to her knees next to him. "Vaughn."

"I'm all right, darling. Would you mind fetching the doctor?" He kept his voice calm because she was crying and clinging to him. The chaos outside the church had calmed only a little, but he didn't focus on any of that. He kept his gaze on Perdita and hers was on him.

"And to think you were worried I didn't love you," he teased.

Her eyes filled with tears. "Vaughn." She clutched him fiercely. "Please don't joke about that."

He managed to wrap one arm around her as he righted himself. Only then did he dare to look at his wound. It wasn't deep. He'd been hit in the shoulder, the bullet passing through muscle alone. It was really more of a graze.

"Is it bad?" Perdita asked, holding herself close to him.

"No, not at all. Lucky for us, I'm damned hard to kill."

Perdita stared at him, blinking rapidly as tears formed in her eyes, and Vaughn knew she was upset at his teasing.

The doctor arrived a few minutes later. His residence, thankfully, was not far from the church. Vaughn and Perdita went back inside while his wound was tended. They sat in the last pew, where Vaughn removed his cloak, waistcoat, and shirt.

"Damn, it's bloody cold in here," Vaughn muttered as the doctor cleaned his wound.

"Lucky, that's what you are," Dr. Williams said. "Mostly a graze. I'll bind it up, and you must take care to keep the bandage fresh. No vigorous activity for a few days, I'm afraid." The doctor shot Vaughn a pointed look and then said to Perdita, "I understand young love and the passion of newlyweds, but none of that, you hear? Not for three or four days."

"Like hell," Vaughn growled.

Perdita squeezed his arm. "If he says we mustn't, then we won't. But I shall make up for it. Once we can." Her cheeks pinked in a delightful blush.

"I'll hold you to that promise, darling." He had a few delicious ideas of what he'd do once he was mended.

She smiled back, her eyes sparkling with tears. "Good."

Dr. Williams grunted as he bandaged Vaughn's wound. By the time they were ready to leave the church, they found Perdita's father waiting outside. Milburn's body had been removed from the street.

"Your butler has called for the magistrate, Vaughn. I doubt there will be any further questions. Everyone saw what happened."

"Thank heavens." Perdita rested her head against Vaughn's shoulder. The gesture made his stomach flutter with a quiet sort of thrill, one that lingered and made him feel dizzy.

Mrs. Darby smiled warmly at him. "Let's get you both home."

Home. Home with Perdita and her family. *They are my family now.* With a little grin, he walked with his bride down to the waiting coach, ignoring the twinge of pain in his shoulder. He was not alone. Not anymore.



Three long days later, Perdita found herself sitting on the edge of her bed, holding a small box, wearing nothing but her shift. Nerves danced in her chest and belly. She couldn't help it. Tonight she was going to give Vaughn his Christmas gift, albeit a few days late, and she prayed he would not be upset with her.

Many men would not react well to having matters of pride exposed. But in the last few days so much had changed between them. Since they could not make love, they had lain in each other's arms and whispered in the dark about their hopes, their dreams, and their lives before.

It astonished her to realize it was indeed possible to love a man who'd been a stranger to her so recently. Yes, lust had been there, but after everything they'd shared, love had crept up on her, silent as a thief, and now she truly loved him. She knew he loved her too. If stepping between her and Milburn's pistol hadn't been enough, the last three days had proven it. The gentle smiles, the way he listened, the way they'd lain together, their heads close and limbs entwined. Hearts beating as one.

She sat up straighter when her bedchamber door opened.

Vaughn walked in, flashing her a wicked grin that made her laugh.

"Three days, as ordered. And now you're mine. *All mine.*" He started toward the bed, but she held up a hand.

"Wait."

He stopped, his eyes questioning hers. She looked at the little box and thought of what it contained.

Please understand why I must give it back to you.

"What is that?" he asked.

"A Christmas present, long overdue." She raised it up, and he slowly took it from her. He was so beautiful, the way only a man could be while wearing nothing save his buckskin breeches and a dark-blue silk vest. Vaughn opened the box, his eyes locked on the gift.

It was, of course, the pocket watch she'd bought back from the jeweler.

"I..." His voice broke as he took the watch from the box. The silver glinted in the light. "How..." He gave his head a little shake. "This was my grandfather's. I had to sell it."

"You promise not to be angry with me?" she asked.

"I promise." His eyes blazed, though not with anger.

"I saw you, that day at the jeweler's. I didn't mean to see what I did. But once I realized you might be buying me a ring, I couldn't let you give up something I could tell was dear to you."

"All this time you've kept it?"

"I was afraid you would be angry with me for buying it back, but I couldn't leave it there. It belongs to you. You're not upset, are you?"

His thumb brushed over the silver lid of the watch before he set it on the table by her washbasin. He unbuttoned his waistcoat methodically, then removed his shirt. He loosened the placket of his trousers, but didn't remove them.

"Vaughn..."

"Remove your shift," he commanded. His voice was low and dark. His eyes, however, promised that wicked, forbidden fantasies would be fulfilled. She stood uneasily in the wake of his intense gaze. "*Now.*"

She rushed to remove her shift. He plucked it from her hands the moment it was free of her. He folded it and set it on the armchair by her vanity table.

"When we sleep, you will remove your shift. I like to be beside you skin to skin," he murmured as he reached up to trail a finger along her collarbone.

Perdita shivered and moved to cover her breasts, but his dark gaze stopped her.

"In this room, I am in control," he reminded her. She nodded, her

body heating. She would never let him control her outside of bed, but in bed she would willingly succumb. She craved his commands, his control. It was both thrilling and exciting.

“Lie back for me, darling.”

She did so, trying to lift her head to see him as he retrieved his neckcloth from his shirt.

“What—”

He hushed her as he came back to the bed. He took her wrists and bound them together with the cloth. Then he raised her hands above her head and tied them to one of the bedposts.

Perdita’s heart raced. She struggled against the restraints but couldn’t get free.

“Here, alone, we can indulge our dark sides,” he said, a smile curving his lips at the corners. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” She did trust him. The bandage around his shoulder reminded her that this man would give his life for her.

“Good.” He climbed onto the bed, caging her body as he kissed her. His lips moved expertly over hers. Then he traced a burning path down to her bare breasts. Perdita sucked in air as his lips fastened around one nipple. It was an overpowering sensation to feel his hot mouth on her breasts, sucking. He nipped the tender bud, a whisper of pain blending in with the pleasure before he moved to her other breast. He moved lower and lower down her body. Her thighs clenched together, but he shoved them apart.

“You’re such a pretty pink,” he whispered against her mound before he kissed her inner thighs. She opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her with another of his wicked looks.

“You’re mine, sweeting. To play with, to taste. You may only say ‘my lord’ or make sounds of pleasure. Understand?”

She gave a jerky nod and then gasped in shock as he licked her down there. The unexpected burst of sensations had her whimpering, her thighs shaking. His tongue continued playing with her folds and caressing her before he closed his lips around her throbbing bud. Then he sucked on that bundle of nerves, and she screamed in shock at the hard rush of pleasure that exploded through her.

“That’s it,” he coaxed gently as she drifted down from the exquisite high.

“My lord...” She panted softly, barely able to think past those two words.

“Yes?”

She had closed her eyes, but she could hear the smile in his voice. “You are the most wicked man in London. Nay, in England.”

His chuckle surprised her.

“Well, you *did* marry the Devil of London.” He rolled her onto her

stomach. Then, without warning, he smacked her arse with his hand. The blow was not hard, but it made her squeak in surprise. He did it twice more, then stroked his palm soothingly over her bottom. It felt wonderful on the slightly stinging skin. Then she was turned on her back once more as he leaned over her.

“Too much?” he asked.

“No, my lord.”

“Good.” He pressed a heated kiss to her lips before he settled on his knees between her parted thighs. Then he lifted her hips, bringing her close to his lap but lifting her up enough that she could see her body. He tugged his trousers down, and his erection jutted toward her.

“Watch while I claim you,” he ordered. There was a growl in his voice, a hint of the animal just beneath his skin that made her shiver in anticipation. He guided his shaft into her.

“Bloody Christ, you’re tight.” He pushed deeper and deeper into her. She watched in aroused fascination as they joined completely.

He began to thrust into her until they both made soft sounds at the back of their throats as their bodies joined over and over again. “Don’t look away. Don’t shut your eyes.” The muscles of his chest and arms bunched as he pumped into her, and she couldn’t look away, even if she wanted to. Her dark god of the underworld was owning her, body and soul. When their eyes met, she saw in that blinding instant as they came apart at the same time that she owned him too.

Hours later, Perdita lay on top of Vaughn, her legs now tangled with his, their bodies damp, and his slowly measured breathing, that of a man almost asleep, was comforting.

“It wasn’t too much?” he asked.

She lifted her face to rest her chin on his chest. “No. It was perfect.”

The boyish grin she adored was back. He toyed with a lock of her hair, spooling it around one of his fingers.

“A man could get spoiled having you for a wife.”

“Indeed. I am wonderful,” she agreed, biting back a smile.

“Cheeky little chit.” He slapped her buttocks with his free hand, and she hissed. He had shown her his dark desires tonight, and she had discovered that hers matched his.

This beautiful, mysterious man loves me. He excites me. He makes me feel alive.

She kissed his chest and laid her head back down.

“Tell me we shall always be like this.”

“It will always be like this. Except for, of course, when the children are old enough to sneak out of the nursery to find us. It will be even more fun evading the scamps to get a moment alone.” He laughed, the rich sound rumbling deep from his chest.

“You want children?”

“More than anything, except for you.”

She held on to him even tighter. “I’m glad of that.”

He nuzzled her cheek and placed a kiss on her temple. “Are you truly happy to be my wife?”

She lifted her head again. “Infinitely so. And you? Are you happy to be my husband?”

His eyes were serious. “I am. There is something indescribable about the joy of sharing myself with you, of letting you into my heart. It was frightening at first, but now I can’t imagine a day without you.”

“So you love me?” She tried to sound teasing, but she had to hear the words from him.

“I do. I love you to distraction, to the depths of my soul and beyond.”

“I love you too. My white knight.” She brushed a hand over his chest. She’d come to realize that a man in perfect shining armor was a man who’d never been tested. Vaughn, in his tarnished armor, had proven how strong his mettle truly was more than once, and he loved her in ways she’d never dreamed of.

She slid up a few inches to kiss him, knowing that she had found love at last. It was on his lips, on his tongue, and in the way he held her. She knew snow was falling outside tonight and whispered a silent prayer of thanks for the gift of loving someone who loved her in return. It was the sort of miracle she had long given up hope on ever having.

Christmas, after all, was a season for hope, for miracles, for faith, and for love unending.

Tamed for Christmas

Sandra Sookoo

Chapter 1

Five days before Christmas
London, England, 1817

“W hat do you mean I need to go after Emily?”

Mr. Cecil Tame stared at his sister Jocelyn with something akin to horror growing in his chest. She sat on a brocade settee in the parlor of his rented London townhouse, twisting her hands in her lap, but there was no clue to her announcement in her expression. “Why can you not collect her? Emily is your daughter, after all.” The last thing he wanted to do was spend his afternoon with an almost fifteen-year-old girl. His experience with adolescents—male or female—was extremely limited. He glanced at his only sister, the youngest of the four Tame siblings, and his heart lurched. The trouble was, he’d always done whatever she’d asked. This current situation was no different. Clasping his hands behind his back, he narrowed his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“Then why ask this of me?” He was nothing if not forthright.

She heaved a sigh. “Cecil, you *have* to do this. There’s no one else to ask. I’m at my wit’s end.” She laced her fingers together and kept her gaze on them. “Mother and Father are in Spain visiting with Avery before his regiment ships out again, and Alan is still in India. Lord knows when he’ll return to England. I have no one else to turn to.”

“This is true.” Except, he’d just recently come back from America, anticipating his brother Alan’s imminent arrival, of which would not happen soon for reasons his brother had yet to explain by letter. Now, when he’d thought he’d retire before a warm hearth with a good book and a glass of fine brandy, he’d been tapped for a long journey in the cold.

“And you know you wanted to look over the Brighton property

again before winter truly sets in,” Jocelyn reminded him in a sing-song voice. “I have something else pressing I must attend.”

“Also true.” He did want to put the Brighton property to rights. He also contemplated hiding away at the shore from the dearth of Christmastide invitations in Town—something he had no interest in. After all, Brighton was the center of the Tame world when they weren’t all assembled in London for formal events, and with his parents out of pocket, he could easily return to the seaside for the holiday, and pass the time there without need for social interaction. “What am I supposed to do with your daughter once I retrieve her from school?”

“That’s what I need to talk to you about.” Jocelyn raised her gaze to his. Desperation and exhaustion swam in her hazel depths. “I love Emily to distraction. She’s the best thing that happened from my brief marriage. You know this.” The tendons in her neck worked with a hard swallow. “However, I must get away. I need distance. This age with her is trying and my patience is wearing thin, and with the holiday approaching, and the memories it will bring, I cannot...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” As he looked closer, he recognized the lines of strain on her once smooth forehead and the tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. No longer was she the carefree young woman she once was or even the naïve, loving girl who found herself in a hasty marriage at sixteen with a newborn nine months later. She’d always been delicate and appeared even more so now.

“When did I have the chance? You and the other boys have made careers of gallivanting all over the world, pursuing your own desires and interests, content with certain freedoms only men are given in this day and age. You’ve left me here, a widow and mother. Alone.” She stifled a sob. “I cannot take much more. I need time for myself, to rediscover who I am, to think in the quiet. To reorder my life for the good of my child.”

Cecil’s stomach clenched. “I apologize. I never knew.” That didn’t bode well. “It sounds as if you wish to run away—without Emily.” He worked his jaw as he searched for words. “Is this true?”

“Yes.” The word came out on a whisper. “It feels as if I’ve already lived a lifetime, Cecil. I never had a Season. I never had the chance to be properly courted or to experience the world and live a carefree life like you and Avery and Alan.”

“And?”

She swallowed again. “I need a bit of adventure before I settle down into the next phase, especially now that the weather has been so dismal and cold, before I have to figure out how to launch Emily into Society—in London or in Brighton—or, heaven forbid, see her married as early as I was. I rather hope she’ll make a smarter decision

than I did.”

He remained silent. As he remembered it, Jocelyn hadn't wanted to listen to counseling from any of her family members. At the time, she'd been enamored with the whirlwind courtship as well as the idea of being in love and subsequently being wed. She had no choice other than being thrown right into family life and the heartbreak of having her husband go off to fight Napoleon and losing him shortly after.

Though the Duke of Stanwycke was Cecil's godfather, he rather doubted that tenuous link to the loftier circles in Society would do much good helping with Emily's launch—should that responsibility fall on his shoulders. Plus, with unrest and unease following last year's abysmal harvest due to not having warm, summer temperatures and its effects on the food supplies with shortages all over, there was continuing rioting throughout Europe and America, as well as immigration to escape famines.

None of this his sister needed to hear at the moment. “Where will you go?”

“John's family owns property somewhere in the Caribbean. I forget exactly where, but his father offered the loan of it if I ever wished for time away from England.” She worried her bottom lip. “So, not only do I need you to retrieve Emily from school, but you'll also have to keep her while I'm out of pocket.” The last was said in such a soft voice, he had to move closer to hear it.

“For how long?” Inwardly, Cecil reeled. So, it had come to the worst of what he feared. Of course he'd take Emily in even though every alarm bell went off in his head. How could he be a surrogate father at his advanced age of six and thirty? What did he know of parenting a child let alone a young girl on the cusp of womanhood, and if his sister was to be believed, in a trying phase?

Jocelyn shrugged. She tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear. “I'm not certain. All I know is that if I don't do something, I am unsure how long I'll be able to be a good mother to Emily.” A tear escaped to her cheek, and she wiped it away. “Or even to stay alive for anyone in this family.”

He staggered as if he'd been struck. “You would kill yourself?” How far gone in grief she still was to even think such a thing.

“I might.” She paused, lifting a haunted gaze to his. “It would be all too easy to off oneself during this time of year when it is driven home with every song and story of how alone one is. I still miss John after all this time. It grows worse every year.”

“Yet me letting you slip away to the ports unknown is a better idea? Perhaps a visit to a physician would be best.” Cold fear slid down his spine. Not only would he be responsible for Emily, but now worry for his only sister gripped his heart. “Jocelyn, you don't have to

do this. Let me take care of you. It is my duty as your eldest brother.”

“No. No doctors, no coddling, no brotherly concern. No locking me away for my own good.” She shot to her feet, and only then did Cecil see how thin and gaunt she’d become since he’d been in America. “I need distance to discover who I am again. I must find closure from John’s death or I fear I will waste away. I... was never able to give my husband a proper goodbye or to grieve. I had to be strong for Emily. Perhaps in this way I can finally lay him to rest in my heart.” She put a hand on his arm, and her fingers trembled. “Cecil, let me go. Take care of Emily. I promise to return soon.”

For the longest time he held her gaze. His heart broke at the infinite sadness lurking in her eyes. Finally, he nodded. “You’ve already made the arrangements, I assume?”

“Yes. The paperwork is in my reticule. Niles is bringing my bags to the hall as we speak. I merely need your permission... and your blessing.” Tears welled in her eyes. “There is a ship leaving from the Port of London this evening. In order to make certain I’m on it, you must go after Emily. I cannot do both, and it’s uncertain if there will be another ship any time soon with the way prices have gone mad, and no one wishes to brave the unruly seas without just cause so close to Christmas.”

A headache pounded behind his eyes. It would seem life was becoming trying all over and not just on home soil. “Have you spoken to her of your plans?”

“No.” The tears fell to her cheeks, and she left them there. “Please tell her I love her and I’m doing this so I’ll be there for her in years to come. I hope she’ll forgive me.”

Unable to do nothing, Cecil bundled his sister into his arms as his throat thickened with emotion. “Go with my blessing, and come back to your family whole. I’ll strive to do my best by Emily.” *Please God let me not make a mess of this.* It was better to let Jocelyn go than to lose her forever and have to explain to his niece why she’d lost her mother. He pressed a kiss into her hair. “Godspeed.”

How was he supposed to break the news to Emily when he’d only seen the girl a few times each year?



Brighton, England

Four hours later, Cecil strode the deserted corridors of Miss Pennyroyal's Academy for Young Ladies. He would have arrived earlier except his carriage had broken a wheel, and it had taken both the driver and him to switch it out in the dismal rain and the mud. Deuced bad weather for Christmastide, yet snow would have made the journey ten times worse.

The delay would have been all well and good on an ordinary, but it seemed the students had already departed, no doubt anxious for their holidays to begin. Had Emily gone or was she fuming in a parlor or dormitory? A shudder ripped down his spine. Dealing with a temperamental young woman was bad enough. Facing one at the height of annoyance was a terrifying prospect.

Though he'd been greeted by a formidable dragon of a woman at the front door, he'd waved away her offer of a late tea and told her he'd seek out the headmistress himself despite the fact he looked a mess due to the inclement weather and carriage mishap. She hadn't opposed him as it was plain she'd been on her way out, her arms full of sweets and parcels, no doubt given her by kind-hearted students.

Cecil shook his head as he marched with purpose along yet another hallway in the building. The scents of lemon oil and chalk filled the air. It reminded him of his own youth and time spent in various schools stuck behind desks when all he'd wanted to do was strike out on his own and explore the world. They competed with other, more holiday-inducing scents—sharp pine from the boughs hanging at the doorways and the pungent aromas of oranges and cloves nestled within the greenery. Such simple things, those scents, and ones that transported him back to his own school holidays when he and his siblings caroled through the halls of the Brighton property and played games to their hearts' content.

He glanced at oil paintings of various distinguished teachers that lined the walls and suppressed a shudder as he came back to the present. The stern visages didn't appear any more likable than his own instructors had been, with the exception that most of them were female in this hallowed institution.

He stopped before a portrait of a rather attractive woman. Though her blonde hair was pulled back in a severe knot and her arms were crossed firmly over her chest and her mouth was set in a disproving line, her light blue eyes—the color of a summer sky over the ocean—held intelligence and a sense of humor. The lace fichu she wore covered her generous décolletage, proclaiming her position on the shelf, but she didn't appear to be that old, perhaps a few years

younger than him. An odd sort of thrill careened down his spine as he stared at the enticing peek of cleavage. He snorted away the aberration. Imagine feeling anything for such a severe sort of woman.

Cecil peered at the gold-plated placard beneath the painting. It read: "Miss Phoebe Pennyroyal, Headmistress, 1812 to present."

What a pleasant name. Again, his thoughts jogged to very personal suggestions about her. How did a woman end up as a headmistress of a young ladies' academy if she wasn't a dragon like the one who met him at the door? But he couldn't tear his attention from her eyes. Once more he stared into those painted depths. What secrets did she keep, and did she ever let her hair down? If so, how long was it, and was it curly or straight? Interest of the lustful kind prickled through him, stirring his groin to life. What did such hair look like spread out over a pillow by candlelight? The thought made him smile then alternately frown. He shoved the inappropriate musings away. *I'm too old for such things.* Romance or even desire had no claim on his time anymore. Not when there were more important things to spend one's attention on.

As he started off along the corridor once more, his frown deepened. Over the course of his life, he'd kept busy with various pursuits and adventures around the world, so that when he'd been home for any length of time and his focus had wandered to the possibility of leg shackling or setting up a nursery, anxiety set in, he threw himself into another quest.

Being rooted or connected would have put an end to his cavalier life and a stop to his global exploits, yet sometimes, in the dark of night when his bed was empty and cold, he wondered if he'd missed his chance for courtship and romance.

As the first son, wasn't it his responsibility to make certain the Tame name lived on? Not that there was a title which needed attention, or holdings depending upon an heir—his father was a successful merchant and ship captain, and a bastard son of a marquess besides—but what of Cecil's personal needs and wishes? Neither of his parents had meddled in his life or even hinted he needed to set his house in order. They'd much preferred all their children find happiness.

For that he'd been grateful. Sure, they doted on Emily as she was the only grandchild thus far, but had they given up hope he'd ever procreate? At six and thirty, he'd never taken a mistress, never felt admiration or respect enough for a woman that would warrant the need to declare himself or slake his desires. Did that mean he was a confirmed bachelor or damaged in the upper story that he hadn't settled down?

Or, damnation, was he broken in some way because he didn't

move from bed to bed like so many others of his age and social standing?

So lost in thought was he that when he rounded a corner, he ran right into a woman.

"I beg your pardon." Instinctively, he put his arms around her to prevent her from tumbling to the floor, and then he became aware of how pleasant it was to actually hold a woman—a woman to whom he wasn't related, and he tightened his grasp. A subtle, floral scent invaded his nose, and soft curves gave way beneath his fingers as he moved his hands to her waist to steady her. The pleasing flare of rounded hips urged him to further explore, but he was frozen, his fingers still as her body heat seeped into his hands through his gloves. "I should have paid more attention to where I walked." As he held her at arm's length, he stifled a gasp of surprise.

The woman he'd run into was none other than the school's headmistress. And, God help him, she was more attractive in the flesh than she was on canvas. Once more his member stirred.

"That you should have, sir. I expect wool-gathering from my students. I do not expect it from adults who should know better." Chastisement rang in her voice—a strong, forceful voice needed to demand order and attention in the classroom as well as from the teachers under her command. "And your appearance certainly leaves something to be desired." She demanded his immediate focus and pinned him to the floor with her direct, blue-eyed gaze. Not one hair on her blonde head was out of place. Not one tendril escaped the confines of its severe bun.

Cecil had the wicked urge to tug a few strands free merely to see how she'd react to such disorder. "I cannot help the weather or the abysmal state of the roads due to the same." He would gladly do whatever she asked if only a smile would touch those eyes. Would they dance with amusement or would they remain frosty cool? How to make that happen?

"That is not an excuse." She quirked an arched eyebrow. "Also, you are still holding me. For no reason that I can ascertain."

He was indeed. His mouth opened and closed like a fresh-caught trout. It was as if he'd been caught up in a whirlwind that had his mind in a fog. Shaking his head and hoping like mad his common sense would return post haste, Cecil cleared his throat and released her as if she were on fire. Immediately, he mourned the warmth of her. "I apologize."

"You already said that." Not a hint of amusement entered her slightly annoyed expression. She stood rigid with her back ramrod straight as if she didn't know how, or had never had the opportunity, to relax. Her dress of plain, long-sleeved navy wool didn't compliment

her figure and looked very much like the one she'd worn for the portrait in the hall. Even the lace at her bosom remained in place. The one flair of personality was the bit of merry holly pinned upon the lace.

How different would she appear if she wore jewel-toned silks or satins that would give personality and vibrancy to her face?

"It does not make it any less true for the repetition." He dared to grin at this mystifying woman.

She rested an assessing gaze on him and heat crept up the back of his neck. "Is there something I can do for you?" She didn't return his grin.

Besides doing me the honor of walking through the park, sharing dinner, perhaps allowing a kiss so that I may try to melt the ice surrounding you? Apparently, his common sense had taken a holiday along with the students at the school. Feeling foolish and very much like a green, callow youth, he cleared his throat. "Yes, of course. I am Mr. Cecil Tame, and am here to collect my niece, Miss Emily Bertrand. I realize I'm late, but—"

"You're beyond late. I am the last teacher on property and am ready to close and lock the school. All the other students were released to their caregivers over an hour ago." She narrowed those spectacular eyes, but the effect was as stunning as ever.

"Once again, I do apologize."

"I'm certain you do. Meaningless words, those. No matter. You're here now. Miss Bertrand is in the back parlor, but I must warn you, she's in a mood and is most surly." Briefly, she shook her head. "Hers will not be a pleasant journey home."

A laugh escaped him. "I believe it. From all accounts, my sister is quite frazzled with the girl." His laughter died, nearly choked him as his thoughts lingered on his Jocelyn and her fragile state of mind as well as what he needed to tell her daughter. "Perhaps it would be best if you showed me into the parlor straightaway. There are pressing matters afoot."

"Oh?" She laid a hand on his sleeve, and small tingles of shock worked their way up his arm. The woman was a few inches shorter than his average height and she was of the perfect stature that he could stare at her highly kissable lips without attracting too much scrutiny. Lips that were full in the slightest of ways. Lips that had the capacity to glide over skin and wrap around certain parts...

Devil take it! Now was not the time. He forced such thoughts away and put Jocelyn front and center.

"Are you quite all right?" The concern in the headmistress' voice sent his thoughts scattering once more. "You look as if you could be ill at any moment."

Get hold of yourself, Cecil. You're past the age of making a cake of yourself in a woman's presence. Though he wasn't so certain since his insides were in knots, to say nothing of the new interest his groin showed. "I shall be fine. I merely need to impart some unpleasant information to my niece regarding her mother."

"I see." The woman nodded, all traces of annoyance gone from her eyes. "Now that I think on it, she has seemed more worried than troublesome." She tapped a slender finger against her chin. "Would you rather I accompany you for moral support? At times, family drama can use a mediator. I am comfortable in the role."

The thought of being by her side in any capacity sounded like a splendid idea. Perhaps it would give him more time to harness his wild imaginings. "That would be most appreciated."

"Very well." A small smile lifted the corners of her lips. It transformed her from a severe, serious headmistress into a woman who could break the heart of any man she chose. Those damn kissable lips slightly parted and revealed pearly white teeth. "Now it's my turn to beg your pardon. I've yet to introduce myself. I'm Miss Phoebe Pennyroyal, headmistress of this school." She held out a gloved hand, her gaze intense, clearly expecting him to take it.

"A pleasure to meet you." The second Cecil took her hand warmth sank into his skin despite the kid gloves they both wore. A spark danced up his spine, much like it had when he'd briefly and accidentally held her in his arms. *Curious indeed.* "Well, my driver is waiting and the rain is still falling. I should get the distasteful task over with so I can begin my new life with my niece—or at least the holiday."

"Yes, of course. This way, please." She disengaged her hand from his then led him down the hallway. "I assume from your hint you'll be taking custody of Miss Bertrand?"

"I am, at least temporarily." *I hope.* The swish of her rounded hips captured his attention and his fingers itched to hold her again.

"Well, you seem a decent sort, and are fit enough and of sound mind to take on a strong-willed adolescent such as Emily." The report of her heels on the worn hardwood echoed in the silent hall. No doubt she wore hideous, serviceable boots instead of satin, beaded slippers. But, of course, such footwear wouldn't be practical in this setting. As it was, he didn't have a chance to respond to the awkward compliment, for she said, "Here we are, the back parlor where the girls often practice presiding over tea services and entertaining using the social graces they've learned."

Cecil stepped into the room and steeled himself for hysterics and tears. Instead, Emily sat on a settee, the picture of a composed young lady, in a dress of pale yellow with a matching ribbon tied around her

upswept brown hair. She looked so much like her mother had at that age, he caught his breath. An ache overtook his heart. This would not be pleasant. "Emily."

She jerked her head toward the door. Surprise filled her expression. "Uncle Cecil." After springing to her feet, she rushed across the room, holding out her hands to him. When he took them, she said, "Mother sent you. She's finally gone 'round the bend and has left England, hasn't she?"

"Yes. I'm afraid so." He cast a glance at Miss Pennyroyal, whose face reflected fervent curiosity. The knots in his stomach calmed just from one look in those blue eyes. "Perhaps we should sit down for a minute so I can explain."

And please God let there be no feminine outbursts.

Chapter 2

Miss Phoebe Pennyroyal stood in the doorframe as Mr. Tame

led his niece back to the settee then drew her down beside him. She had no idea what had transpired with Emily's mother, but the haunted shadows in Mr. Tame's brown eyes as well as Emily's response hinted that perhaps there was something wrong in the woman's upper stories.

A tragedy, that. For if word got 'round, the lady would be condemned to an institution, and that would be worse than death from all accounts of those places.

"Would either of you care for tea? I hardly think this will be a quick conversation." She disliked standing around where she wasn't wanted, and in an academy for young ladies, that was more often than not. The girls thought they were quite independent, yet they'd never tested their wings or their independence and found the world outside the school was still a scary place indeed. As for needed? Well... She trained her stare upon the girl's uncle. That remained to be seen, but the fact couldn't be ignored that her fingers still tingled from where he'd briefly clasped her hand earlier.

Mr. Tame turned and glanced at her. "Actually, Miss Pennyroyal, I would be most obliged if you'd stay." He slid his heated gaze down her person then back up again, and she swore it felt as if he caressed her with his hands. Warmth rushed through her cheeks as if she were of an age as the girls she taught instead of a widow and mother of three and thirty, long past the age of such feelings. "Your insights might prove helpful." As he looked once more to his niece, the heat in his eyes faded, replaced by apprehension.

"All right." She wished she hadn't worn her serviceable navy wool dress today, but with the constant rain and the drafty halls of the school, she seemed to always be cold. *How silly I've grown.* It wasn't as if her drab self had caught the eye of one as dashing as Mr. Tame. He wasn't here for romance. Point of fact, he wouldn't linger at this place longer than it took to talk with his niece.

Not to mention, she wasn't looking for a flirtation even if he were interested. She was content with her life as the headmistress, as well as mother to her sixteen-year-old son, Max. She'd survived four years of widowhood without an emotional breakdown, and that was as good an endorsement as anything that she had good sense about her and a sound head on her shoulders. No flights into fancy for her. Hadn't she always done the proper thing, said the proper words? That, as well as her keen understanding of the mind of adolescent girls, had landed her the position of headmistress.

Yet, she stifled a sigh. At times it was bloody difficult remembering she was old and not given to flirtations or anything else pleasant to the flesh. As Phoebe advanced into the room, Mr. Tame resumed his conversation.

"You are correct in your assumption, Emily. Your mother, I believe, is battling exhaustion and depression. Her mind is not in a sound state." He paused and a muscle in his jaw ticked. "This ungodly weather doesn't help her mood. If it would but snow..." He waved a hand in dismissal. "She will, this evening, be on a ship bound for the Caribbean. Perhaps sunshine and warm weather will help soothe her troubled spirit." He bowed his head. "Letting her go is for the best, I hope."

The young lady nodded. Her eyes were wide as she focused on her uncle's face. "Am I to come live with you in London? What of my friends here? I thought you were in America, making your fortune. What of your travels and business?" Excitement threaded through the girl's voice. "Oh, can I accompany you on your journeys? I can keep your papers in order and act as your secretary. Perhaps keep your house. Will we traverse the world? I can glean my education from real life experience."

Travel was something Phoebe would readily condone. Nothing gave a person an education quite like witnessing real life.

A chuckle escaped him, and his expression reflected genuine affection. "I've escaped America as the residents of that nation are rather grouchy, and not of the sort I'm used to. In the end, I wanted to come home and tend to my own property and see how the family fares."

"Oh, you are not bound for an exotic land." Emily frowned. "So, you're here in Brighton then, permanently?"

"Yes, and I'll remain here for some time to come—at least through the holidays. There is no more family in London, and I do not relish running the gauntlet of Town social events. I want relaxation and the calm that only the sea brings."

The young girl gave an unladylike snort. "But it is so boring here!"

"That depends on your way of looking at the place." His smile was

indulgent. "For the moment, you'll live at the Brighton townhouse with me, for as long as it takes until your mother returns to us." His baritone voice broke at the end, and he cleared his throat. His expression betrayed nothing. "There is no need to force you away from your friends at this time."

"Quite a sensible plan." Phoebe slipped onto a matching settee across from the pair. Her throat constricted at the pain and worry in his tone. What must it be like for him to suddenly take up parental responsibilities? From all accounts, Mr. Tame was quite the man about town, a worldly traveler more suited to adventure than child rearing, yet her sense of propriety surged to the forefront. No matter what, she was still a headmistress and Emily was her charge. "However, forgive me for being so blunt, Mr. Tame, but local Society will frown upon Miss Bertrand staying under your roof without a chaperone."

He narrowed his eyes as he gazed at her. "Are you implying that I'll somehow defile my niece—my own flesh and blood—if we live in the same house?" A warning rang in his question. "If so, I can assure you I'm quite honorable."

"I'm not saying it, sir. I'm merely telling you what gossip and rumor will say. Unfortunately, it is the way of the world, and vile tongues have a life of their own when bored." By accident, her gaze strayed over the broad sweep of his shoulders. Though his greatcoat hid the breadth of his chest and cheated her out of knowing what color his tailcoat was or how it fit his person, she contented herself with employing her imagination. In her mind, he was quite fit, and he was a handsome man. The sharp cut of his jaw was swoon worthy. Would his frame be muscled? She couldn't stop her perusal as her gaze slid down the length of him. She imagined how firm his thighs might be beneath the fawn-colored breeches he wore. Heat stole into her cheeks. *Good heavens*. She firmly shoved those thoughts away. In this instance, her imaginings couldn't hold a candle to reality, and that reality stared back at her as she lifted her gaze to his. She sucked in a surprised breath at the speculation in his eyes and tried valiantly to recall current conversation. "At least, that is my opinion. I do ask that you consider your niece's reputation."

Emily huffed, the same little exhalation of breath she used in the classroom when things didn't go her way. "Don't mind Miss Pennyroyal, Uncle. She's forever reminding us to remember our reputations and seeing evil where none lurks. No one does the mother hen routine better than her."

Phoebe's face burned with annoyance. "Safety first, Miss Bertrand," she reminded and hated the sharp sound of her voice. Was she truly that waspish?

"Yes, well, I suppose that is what a good headmistress does." Mr.

Tame's answer was more vague than concrete. Yet he kept his focus on Phoebe. "So, in your valued opinion, you believe I need a companion for Emily?"

"It's what I'm advising." She nodded. "It would make everyone involved feel more comfortable. Also, because you're relatively new to having young people in residence, I would say a companion could act as a go-between in the event tempers flare... and they will. Miss Bertrand is quite spirited at times."

He looked between her and his niece. "True. Jocelyn did say she and Emily frequently butted heads."

"That's because Mother doesn't understand me. She's always telling me not to do what she did when she was my age, but if she never shares the stories of what exactly she did, how am I to know?" Emily crossed her arms over her chest, hopelessly crushing the pretty, sprigged green muslin dress that was much more suited to warm summer afternoons than a dreary, wet winter day.

"Yes, well, suffice it to say, you needn't know those tales just now." A muscle worked in his jaw. "What if I don't follow the dictate, Miss Pennyroyal?" He raised an eyebrow. Was he daring her?

Phoebe shrugged though flutters filled her belly at the cockiness of that gesture. "I cannot say as I'm obviously not trained in discerning the future through magic." She'd known it was a cheeky comment, but she couldn't recall it once it left her lips. After a school term full of fielding such sarcastic asides, it was only a matter of time before she picked up the habit.

Good heavens, what have I turned into?

Emily gasped. "Miss Pennyroyal, for shame!" Yet she'd almost laughed before she schooled her expression into pubescent outrage. "My uncle is quite the respected businessman."

After a few tense seconds, a grin pulled at the corners of Mr. Tame's sensual mouth, which caused Phoebe's thoughts to meander down darkly wicked paths where those lips were skating over her skin, hovering just inches over her bared nipple... "Forgive my niece's outburst." The amusement in his voice scattered her musings. "I'm afraid Emily has gotten rather rude away from her mother's influence. Perhaps a stint with me will do her wonders." He stood and clasped his hands behind his back. "What have you to do for the next two months, Miss Pennyroyal?"

"Me?" She looked up at him, her mouth agape.

"Her?" Emily echoed the sentiment. "Surely you cannot be serious, Uncle. She's a teacher, the headmistress! We call her the prude of Montpelier Road." The girl clapped a hand over her mouth. "Er, I meant to say, I will *not* spend Christmastide with her underfoot."

The shock in the young woman's voice suggested being an

educator was a fate worse than death and not to be entertained. It coaxed a smile from Phoebe anyway. Her students always thought teachers didn't exist outside the school. "I cannot help my profession, Miss Bertrand. And neither will I accept Mr. Tame's assumption that I have nothing else to do over my holiday." She refused to think of the box full of scandalous French novels she'd confiscated from various students over the term that she'd been dying to delve into. Beyond that, what else was she supposed to do with the atrocious weather? Yes, reading about the heated affairs and dalliances of make believe characters in front of a fire sounded like just the thing. It wasn't the Christmases of her youth, but it wasn't the worst thing. "Also, I do have a son to look after. If I accepted your position, I couldn't very well bring him along."

Both Mr. Tame and Emily stared at her as if she'd sprouted a second head. "You're married?" A hint of disappointment tinged his voice. "But you are a miss."

"You have a child? But you're a miss," Emily protested in much the same vein as her uncle. She glanced from Phoebe to her uncle then back. "Yet you preach at us not to land in scandalbroth?" Haughty disdain filled her voice and expression.

"That's enough, Emily."

"But Uncle Cecil..."

"Enough." Mr. Tame's tone brooked no argument and sounded much like a thunder boom. "Go back to your quarters and wait there until I or Miss Pennyroyal retrieves you." He said nothing further while Emily marched from the room. Once she'd exited the parlor, he turned to Phoebe. "I apologize for Emily's behavior, but perhaps you should explain. It is quite a disturbing piece of news."

"Not as disturbing as one would think, considering I'm well past the first or even second blush of youth," she shot back, again cursing her penchant for speaking her mind.

"Touché." He gestured to her settee. "May I sit next to you?"

Her stomach flipped. Why the devil would he do that when he current position was more than adequate? "Yes, I suppose," she allowed as he stared at her, his eyes unreadable. None of the other parents ever wanted to sit next to her if there was need for a talk. Mostly, they sat across from her as if she had the plague, for no one wanted to hear less than perfect things about their children.

Mr. Tame settled next to her, so close there was a mere six inches of space separating them. Heat from his body bridged the slight gulf and an answering warmth infused her bones. He turned toward her, and his knee knocked against hers. "I'm as confused as Emily. I do not begrudge you a child, but your title is throwing me."

Tingles danced over her skin at the contact. Phoebe clasped her

hands in her lap to hide their shaking. *Good heavens, I'm acting like a school girl.* "I can imagine. When I took the headmistress position at the school, I kept my maiden name because the trustees wished to change *its* name. I didn't think Mrs. Snell's Academy had the panache necessary to expand enrollment. My first moniker was the best option."

His lips twitched, and she couldn't tear her gaze away from his mouth. What would it feel like against her own? "No, I don't suppose so. Then, you're married?"

"I'm a widow. Four years now. Mr. Snell died of pneumonia and a weak heart." Sadness prickled her chest from mentioning her deceased husband, but it seemed like a lifetime had passed since she lost him, on a rainy day very much like this one. She wasn't the same woman now—didn't want to be. "After he died, I needed a new challenge, and around that time, the school's trustees were looking for a new headmistress. It was perfect timing for all of us."

"You have my condolences." He held her gaze. Compassion glimmered in the brown depths. "And the boy?"

A laugh escaped her throat. This man pulled confidences from her like he plucked lint from a sleeve. "Well, he's hardly a boy any longer. He's a tall and lanky youth of sixteen, and sometimes, his moodiness vexes me to no end. He can be sweet and loving then surly and obstinate at the next turn. Much like Emily." She smiled. "But, he's growing into a fine young man who takes after his mama in looks—not that that's anything to gush over. I only wish he were as efficient."

"Give him time. I well remember those awkward years of trying to find my place in the world but fit into society." He touched her hand. Tingles flew up her arm and she shifted in her spot when answering tingles swept into her core. "When I was his age, I'm afraid I landed into more scrapes than I should have due to false bravado, yet when a girl stumbled into my path, I was gripped with such terror I was rendered tongue-tied."

She tried to imagine him as a youth, but could only see him as the man sitting next to her who looked at her with interest and warmth in his gaze. "Oh, Max is quite awkward around everyone. I suspect he doesn't want to disappoint anyone or has no idea what to say in this new, adult world, so he says nothing, which then makes people assume he's being rude."

"I understand." He glanced around the room as if the boy would suddenly appear. "Where is Max now?"

"At the moment, he's spending time with a friend in London but will arrive in Brighton in a few days. Just in time for Christmas dinner no doubt."

"And once he returns, is there a friend or a relation he can stay

with, which will let you accept the position as companion to Emily?" Polite inquiry threaded through his voice.

"Perhaps." Though she would be mad to accept such a position, especially when she couldn't control her thoughts around this man. "I have a sister who lives not far from here. Max is forever asking to stay with his cousins as he feels comfortable with them, and they love the water as much as he does, but I must say, I haven't agreed to your offer."

"If you're concerned for propriety, let me assure you I will not molest you or approach you in any way. You'd stay in the guest bedroom, which is next to Emily's and at the opposite end of the hall from mine. After all, you're a widow, so you have no need of a companion for yourself."

She frowned. A wave of disappointment washed over her. Of course he'd be a perfect gentleman. Wasn't she so firmly on the shelf and a widow besides, that no man would think of her as a woman who might long for a new romance if given the opportunity? And being a widow to boot was the lesser of the evils of being a debutante since a widow would have no virtue to guard. Life, at times, was quite annoying. "I see." Although, she really did not.

He patted her hand and once more heat wound through her bloodstream like a sip of fine brandy. "I am everything that is honorable and am only concerned for my niece's well-being. Potentially losing her mother is unsettling enough. Inviting gossip for the mere reason I need to take care of her would be beyond aggravating."

Her heart trembled at the pain in his statement. "Mr. Tame, I'm not sure—"

"Please, I would vastly prefer you to call me Cecil. If we are to rub along together under the same roof, I want to do so comfortably without stilted formality."

She had places where him rubbing would feel very nice indeed. Then she quelled those thoughts, buried them at the back of her mind. What right had she to even think them when he didn't think of her in such a way?

At her continued silence, he rose and pulled her into a standing position along with him. "If you would indulge me?"

In what? Giving in to his request to play companion, to make use of his name or hope he'd look upon her as more than a means to skirt Society gossip? The pressure of his hand on hers, the warmth of his fingers on her skin despite their gloves, the maddening twinkle in his eyes and the intensity of that gaze all hurled themselves against her common sense. And fueled the dangerous temptation that awaited. "Indulge you in what, Mr. Tame?" She cursed the frantic beating of

her heart.

“Of making use of my first name.” He edged closer to her, so close that their bodies almost touched, never releasing her hand. “I would like to hear you say it.”

“Oh, very well... Cecil.” Shivers ran up and down her spine. It had been years since she'd been discombobulated by a man's proximity, years since her body cried out to know the touch of one.

He pressed his free hand to his heart. “I never thought my name would sound anything except mundane, but from your lips and in your voice, it has life.”

Tremors moved through her belly from the compliment, and she smiled. “I rather doubt that.” When he remained silent, waiting in expectation, she said on a rush, “I suppose it's only fair that you call me Phoebe.” Why did her voice sound so breathless? She'd been married and widowed, for heaven's sake. There was no reason to be this nervous or affected. “Cecil,” she added for good measure.

His gaze dropped to her lips. Another round of tingles, this time heated, played between her thighs as she stared back at him, her breath coming in tiny pants, her lips parting ever so slightly in the event he might dare to kiss her... Then he shook his head, took a deep breath, let it out and stepped backward, releasing her hand. A startled expression crossed his face as if he'd just woken from a dream. “There's no reason for you to agree to my request, and we don't know each other outside of this meeting, but I love my niece. She's already lost her father and is on the verge of perhaps losing her mother as well. I want to do right by her. I cannot do that unless you help me, Phoebe.”

Her pulse accelerated. Never had she thought her name particularly beautiful or romantic before, but from him, it seemed the case, and that intrigued her even more. “I appreciate your concern.” Not knowing what else to do, she crossed her arms over her chest. “However, I don't know how much help I can give you.” Especially when she felt as if she'd melt into a puddle merely from being in the same room as him. Her heart broke at his crestfallen expression. Then she made a rash decision that was so far removed from her usual adherence to decorum and rules, it shook her soul. “That being said, perhaps I could make an exception for a few weeks until you can find a more suitable companion. In the meantime, we can pray that her mother returns home swiftly.”

It was as if the sun had finally come out, and all from the smile of relief that moved over his face. “Thank you so much.” Without a by-your-leave, Cecil closed the distance and swept her up in a hug. A strong, masculine scent of pine and snow enveloped her; it made her want to cling to him all the longer. Just when she reached to wrap her

arms about his splendid shoulders, he said, "Oh, I beg your pardon." He sobered and let her go. "I let enthusiasm and relief get the best of me."

"Think nothing of it." But she couldn't forget that brief moment when his arms had come around her and made her feel like a vibrant woman again. Neither could she successfully quell the rising disappointment in her breast. "There are a few arrangements I need to make before I can accommodate your request."

"Of course. Take as long as you need." He headed to the parlor door with a bounce in his step he certainly didn't have when he arrived. "I suppose I'll break the news to Emily."

Phoebe nodded. "Until I can inform my son he'll need to stay with my sister, it would be best if Emily stays with me at my house while I pack my possessions. It shouldn't take more than a day at best." Her stomach clenched at the prospect of having a young lady underfoot, and one who considered her worse than an unwanted relative. For the sake of the child, she would put herself into the mousetrap.

"You are a brave woman, Miss Pennyroyal."

"Perhaps, but like you, I care for your niece as I would for any girl under my protection." She worried her bottom lip. "The girls' rooms are on the second floor. You'll find your niece in the first room to the left of the stairs."

"My thanks, once again." He nodded and then he was off.

Phoebe stared at the empty doorway long after he'd departed. Agreeing to be the girl's companion wasn't the most intelligent decision she'd ever made, but it would do in a pinch. She would simply need to ignore her silly reaction to him and forget the dream of finding love again at her age. Cecil Tame wasn't the sort of man a middle-aged woman—or any woman for that matter—thought to marry. He was too much a wanderer at heart regardless of his obvious affection for his embattled sister and recalcitrant niece.

Chapter 3

“**Y**ou may protest all you want, Miss Bertrand, but it won’t

change either of our situations.” Phoebe led her up a set of narrow, wooden stairs once they’d arrived at her cozy row house near the school. “For tonight, you’ll stay with me then we’ll both move into your uncle’s house where I’ll be your companion. End of discussion.”

“I wasn’t given the chance to *have* a discussion. You and Uncle Cecil treat me like a prisoner.” Emily shoved past Phoebe and stormed into the small spare bedroom. She tossed her valise onto the bed. The two trunks had gone with Cecil. “I cannot believe you agreed to such an outrageous thing.” The girl flounced onto the bed and crossed her arms over her chest. Her expression resembled a thundercloud. “How ridiculous and what am I to tell my friends by way of explanation?”

“That is not my concern.” Phoebe tamped the urge to roll her eyes. Such dramatics. “It’s not an ideal situation, I’ll admit. At the moment, there is nothing else to do.” She lingered in the doorway. The girl was obviously anxious and annoyed. Both situations were out of her control, but she couldn’t help that. “Your uncle is trying his best. Please don’t make things more difficult than they need to be. It is a trying time for all of you.”

“What can you possibly know of it?” Emily focused her glare on the wall in front of her. “My mother left me because she cannot bear to remain in England where everything reminds her of something sad. My father died in the war shortly after I was born. I never knew him. And my uncles.” Emily tossed her head in the way only a young woman gripped with righteous indignation could. Her curls flounced. “They are always hither and yon around the world, pursuing their own interests and having adventures. I am alone.”

“Well, you’re not really alone. You have me.” Emily’s summation of her circumstances tugged at Phoebe’s heart.

The young lady scoffed. “You’re a *teacher*.” As if being an educator was like having the plague. She turned her back to the door. “Go

away, Miss Pennyroyal. I just want to go to bed and make this horrible day end so I can start my sentence.”

This time Phoebe did roll her eyes. Every young person went through a martyr stage. Apparently, Emily’s was in full force just in time for Christmas. “Very well. If you should have need for me in the night, I’m next down.” Phoebe pulled the door closed behind her then traversed the short hallway to her room. She sighed as she closed her own door.

The poor girl. That age was tough enough without the hardships Emily had listed. Phoebe fretted as she performed her nightly ablutions and donned a long-sleeved, cotton night rail. While in the process of braiding her waist-length, blonde hair for sleeping, she sucked in a breath as a new thought occurred.

Was it too bacon-brained to consider? The idea banging about her brain was perfect, but there was every possibility Cecil would not be pleased. The thought of his annoyance brought knots into her stomach. They’d only just met, and he’d elicited a certain reaction from her. However, it might be just the thing to placate Emily and keep the peace for a while. The risk of his ire would be more than worth it.

Phoebe yanked open her door, marched down the hall and rapped on Emily’s. When a surly “come in” sounded from within, she pushed the portal open and came midway into the girl’s room. Emily was already under the covers with the quilt pulled up to her chin. A candle still burned on the nightstand. A tiny wooden Christmas elf, no doubt pulled from the valise, resided next to the candle—the only evidence of the holiday to be found within the room. With her hair down and her form swallowed by bedclothes, she more resembled a vulnerable child than a young lady on the cusp of womanhood. “In order to make this transition easier for you, me and your uncle, I have a proposal for you.”

“What? There’s nothing that could make this better. Especially since some of my friends have removed to their homes in London, far away from Brighton.” She sounded so forlorn, Phoebe nearly laughed at her. How well she remembered being that age and thinking every tiny ripple in life’s pond had the effect of a hurricane, when in reality it would be forgotten in a month.

“You’ll turn fifteen next week. Perhaps we should convince your uncle to let you throw a house party for some of your local friends, Christmas themed of course. With mince pies and decorations and lively music. Perhaps a few games. It will make the transition easier.” Phoebe fought hard to keep the grin from her expression. She didn’t want to seem victorious or smug. “In this way, you could be introduced to Brighton society in a small version of a Come Out while

your mother is indisposed, and take the pressure from your uncle at the same time. Plus, it would make you both shine, and you can practice the skills you've learned thus far."

"Truly?" Emily slid upright in the bed. The quilt tumbled down revealing the pretty embroidery on the front placket of her night rail. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. I wouldn't have said it if I didn't." She never said anything she didn't mean. Phoebe despised the snippy tone in her voice and reminded herself to handle the girl with the proverbial kid gloves. "Also, if the house party is successful, perhaps your uncle will be more inclined to host a dinner party and let you play hostess. You will gain valuable experience as well as meet more influential members of the community, who, in turn, might offer invitations to other events of more prominent influence." Dear heavens, at least she hoped Cecil would do such a thing. The obstacle would be in convincing him to agree to the house party. It was all a bit of a gamble. "If your uncle intends to remain in Brighton for a while, this could be beneficial to you both." Her chest tightened. *I hope he does not remove back to London so soon.*

"Miss Pennyroyal, you are a gem!" Emily squealed in apparent glee. She kicked her feet as if she were a toddler. "But, I cannot believe you remembered my birthday."

Phoebe frowned. "Why not? You are one of my students as well as a charge in my school. I take an interest in every one of my girls."

"I apologize. I assumed that teachers wished to be rid of us as soon as the term ended as much as we want to be gone from the school." Emily threw back the bedclothes and slipped from the bed. She padded across the floor and stood directly in front of Phoebe. "I'm a bit gobsmacked that a teacher would suggest something so... fun."

"Contrary to popular belief, teachers are quite capable of such." Phoebe couldn't help her smile. "And we do exist in the world outside of the school, in case you wondered." Her smile widened into a grin as she recalled a time last year when she'd gone to the local market and happened to run into a student. The girl had been so mortified that she hid behind a display of aprons until Phoebe had concluded her shopping.

A pretty blush stained Emily's cheeks. If she could hone that skill and bring it out on command, she'd capture more than a few hearts sooner rather than later. "I suppose I've treated you and the other teachers abominably over the term."

Ah, the girl is learning. "Think nothing of it. The term is over, and we are both on holiday. Whatever happened is behind us." Inside, Phoebe rejoiced. It was the closest thing to an apology she'd probably have from the girl, and it was enough. They had reached a tentative

peace. "So, are you willing to help me convince your uncle?"

"Yes, of course." Emily beamed. She stood awkwardly, as if poised for flight, then she closed the distance between them and threw her arms around Phoebe. "Thank you for doing this. It means so much." Her voice broke on the last word.

Wisely, Phoebe pretended she hadn't heard that slight tell of emotion. "Well, it's not a guarantee until we talk to you uncle." She held the girl at arm's length. "I have no doubt we can bring him 'round to our way of thinking." Though how she'd do that still eluded her. It wasn't as if she'd persuade him with looks or wiles. She could barely utter a full sentence in his presence.

"Leave it to me, Miss Pennyroyal. I'm quite skilled in extracting promises and gifts from my uncle." The girl scampered back into bed and under the covers. "After all, I *am* his only niece. He'd give me the moon if I asked for it."

Phoebe had no doubt that he would. From everything she'd seen from him so far, he doted on her. How many men—and bachelors at that—would willingly take in a nearly orphaned niece? "Hold onto that thought, Miss Bertrand. We may need all the luck we can get." She pressed her lips together as another thought occurred. "Also, I do know how you feel, at least a little bit." After crossing the room, she stood at Emily's bed side. "I lost my husband after he dealt with an illness a handful of years ago." She didn't know how wise it was to share such information with a student, but it felt right in the moment.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Pennyroyal. I didn't know." The girl's eyes were limpid with curiosity.

"No, not many people do." She didn't want their sympathy or pitying glances, so she hadn't let the knowledge out past trusted friends. "I... wasn't ready to let him go, didn't know how I'd survive without him, but, with time, not having him around has gotten easier. He's no longer in pain and he made me happy. For that I'm grateful, and I've managed rather well on my own with my son." Her throat tightened at the end of speech. She swallowed hard. Though she would have liked for Max to have a male figure to look up to and teach him how to be a fair and decent gentleman, it had never happened. They'd both gotten through life the best they could. As she'd said to Emily, she'd managed rather well. "I hope for the best where your mother is concerned."

Tears welled in Emily's eyes. She blinked them away. "I hope so too," she whispered then she flipped onto her side and faced away from Phoebe.

"Goodnight, Emily. There is still much to look forward to." Phoebe patted the girl's shoulder, then she blew out the candle and left the room.



F our days before Christmas

Phoebe's stomach twisted as she followed Emily to the front door

of the Tame residence on St. James Street. Cecil had sent a carriage for them and their luggage. During the short trip across town, Emily had sat silently and with her face turned toward the window, presumably watching the ever-present rain. Phoebe didn't have the energy to concentrate on her own anxiety as well as try to cajole Emily into a better mood, so she'd remained just as quiet. The concept of a house party thrown during the most wretched weather seemed silly now that she'd had a night to ponder it. Perhaps if they had snow instead of rain... Yet, she couldn't disappoint Emily, not after they'd shared a tenuous bond the night before.

She sighed, and the relentless rain swallowed the sound. Her breath puffed in the chilly air. *It is cold enough, dash it all, why could it not just snow?*

Now, as the green painted front door to the townhouse that sat in the middle of a long row of similar homes on the waterfront opened, butterflies invaded her belly. This was the first time staying in a man's home since she married her husband and left London to live with him in Brighton. Not that she'd be installed in the Tame home for *that* reason. She fought off the urge to grimace even as familiar heat zipped through her veins. And he was not the sort of man to do anything that wasn't proper. Wasn't he? She knew him not at all. Panic tapped on her spine. *This is only for a short while until a better candidate can be found. I'll be fine.*

"A pleasure to see you again, Miss Bertrand." An older gentleman stepped out from a side room. "May I take your coat?" He slid his gray gaze to Phoebe. "And you, miss?"

Before she could do much more than unbutton her spencer or see to the ties of the cloak she couldn't leave behind, a shiver shot down her spine. *He* was near. The baby fine hairs on the back of her neck quivered and gooseflesh popped on her skin. She didn't need to turn around to know.

"I see the two of you survived the night together." Was that

surprise in his voice? The cheek of the man.

Phoebe glanced toward the staircase winding up the center of the townhouse in a square shape. Her breath caught. Her fingers stilled on her buttons. The flutters in her stomach increased. A rush of warmth circled low in her belly. Cecil descended the last leg of the stairs, looking as dapper and handsome as he had the day before. Now that he wasn't covered in a great coat, she looked her fill. Today, his tailcoat was a bottle green, and paired with fawn-colored trousers and a green-and-cream striped waistcoat, it proclaimed him a man who cared about the image he presented to the world at large.

Plus, his thighs were as taut and muscled as she'd imagined yesterday in the parlor. *Dear heavens, why can't I look away?* It wasn't as if she were a girl just out of the schoolroom given to blushes and flirtatious glances. She'd known the physical side of what happened between men and women. Appreciating a fine male form was not a crime. "Good morning, Mr. Tame, er... Cecil." Heat jumped into her cheeks as Emily snickered. "And yes, Miss Bertrand and I got along famously after we found common ground."

"That's good to hear." When he reached the foyer, he clasped his hands behind his back and approached them both. "Phoebe, please hand over your outer wear to Haynes. You're dripping on my floor."

"Right." Quickly, she removed the spencer while Emily gave hers to the butler. "I apologize for—"

Emily nudged her arm. "Uncle is joking. He thinks he's as funny to other people as he is in his own head." She rolled her eyes. "Don't mind him overly much."

"Drat. It would seem my secret is out." Cecil grinned, and the light in his eyes danced. "Emily, if you don't mind, I'd like to speak with Phoebe for a moment before I show her around the house."

"Um, that depends. Are you planning to discuss a *certain item* with him, Miss Pennyroyal?" Emily lifted an eyebrow.

"I think that conversation would be more appropriate over dinner. I don't want to overwhelm your uncle all at once." She hoped Emily would take the hint. When she did, and ran up the stairs, Phoebe let out a sigh of relief. Had it been a bad idea to offer a tiny bit of freedom to the girl?

"If I didn't know better, I'd think the two of you are planning mayhem." He offered her his arm. "Is there something I should know?"

"At the moment, no." She placed her fingers on his sleeve and allowed him to lead her up to the next level. "This staircase is beautiful. I like the way rooms open from each side of the square." The airy corridors looked down into the foyer where she caught a glimpse of Haynes as he went about his duties. At the next turn, he

wielded a mop, presumably to take care of the water she and Emily left all over the marble. A couple of footmen crossed the area, both carrying her bags.

"Thank you. My father designed this particular townhouse a decade ago. He was a ship's captain and one of the finest merchants I've ever seen. He made his fortune twice over in trade, so built this house with pride. Once some of the residents saw the originality of it, they, of course, wished to copy it, but the renovations are quite costly. This way into my study." He pulled her around another two sides of the hall then into a dark-paneled room. "I cannot tell you how grateful I am you agreed to do this."

"I couldn't very well leave you or Emily in the lurch." Phoebe slipped into a hard leather chair across from his massive desk. One glance around the masculine room was and she felt as if she'd peered inside Cecil's soul. From the dark-wood and leather furniture to the shelves of books ranging in a variety of subjects to the crystal decanters of various liqueurs and wines on the credenza behind his desk to the hand-drawn maps of places the world over framed on the walls, all of it screamed of a man comfortable with his life.

Cecil seated himself behind the desk. "I appreciate it just the same. I want to make certain Emily has a pleasant entry into the adult world. She deserves some brightness in her life, and gaiety while she is here."

"I agree." Phoebe clasped her hands together in her lap. Her fingers were cold inside the lacy gloves. "If you could give me a clue as to what I'm supposed to do while posing as her companion? Am I to escort her to social events while in your company?" A tingle played down her spine. No doubt he moved in higher circles than she for all that he didn't hold a title, and the opportunity to glimpse how a portion of people different from herself lived intrigued her. If nothing else, it would provide fuel for daydreams.

"Perhaps. It hadn't occurred to me to introduce Emily to the local gentry and people of influence, perhaps some of my business associates' families, but you have a point. This might be the perfect opportunity, especially now that you're here." His rich brown gaze landed on her, assessing, speculating. "Do you enjoy attending parties, Phoebe? It is Christmastide, after all, and there have been more than enough invitations issued to me."

Her breathing shallowed. Would she ever become accustomed to hearing him say her name? *Act your age, my girl. You're long past the time in your life for thrills.* "It hasn't been something I've made a habit of doing since the life of a headmistress doesn't afford much time for socializing past school events. Christmas, perhaps, can be the exception." On the way in, she hadn't failed to notice there were no

signs of the holiday around the townhouse. Did he not celebrate?

"Well then, now I have even more incentive to wrangle your companionship." A grin followed the statement.

Flutters multiplied in her stomach. She ignored them. *I'm much too old to mistake regular manners for flirting.* "Thank you. For the moment, it might be best if the three of us eased into domestic pursuits here, such as bedecking your halls with holly and evergreens."

"That can be arranged. I know the servants will appreciate a festive air."

She nodded. It was refreshing to know she wouldn't need to manage him into acquiescing to her requests. "Also, I'd like to know where I'll be staying for the time being, as well as what to expect from you while we're all under the same roof. What are your directives regarding meals and—"

Cecil held up a hand, interrupting her. "Do you often hide behind efficiency?" He raised one of his eyebrows.

"Of course not. This is merely how I conduct every aspect of my life." Did he not like having tasks completed in a timely manner? "And the questions do need answered."

"Perhaps during your time here, you'll find a way, and a reason, to relax and even enjoy yourself during the holiday. After all, you are off from the term as well and have earned the down time." One corner of his mouth tipped upward.

The consideration rendered her speechless. What sort of man was this?

"However, yes, I'd be happy to show you to your chamber. As for what to expect." He rose, came around the desk then leaned a hip against it with his arms crossed over his chest. "Expect nothing except rest and indulging in whatever festal thing your heart can imagine. It is Christmastide, after all, and we have much to be thankful for." His gaze bore into hers, intense but unreadable. "Keep Emily happy and her mind off her mother. Go shopping with her, do whatever it is females do."

"I'm not certain how efficient I shall be in such tasks," she said in a soft voice. Did she even own a gown suitable for a fancy party?

"You will manage." A ghost of a smile curved his lips. "I want you to attend dinner with me and discuss something other than this horrible weather. Perhaps we can discuss our childhoods when there was snow." He shrugged. "For the next few weeks, you're not required to do anything you don't want nor keep to a schedule. Sleep late abed if you desire."

Her mind skittered to dark places. *Will you join me in said bed, Mr. Tame? Kiss me with that firm, supple mouth?* She shook her head in an effort to clear the thoughts she had no right to. "I'm not sure I can

adhere to that rule.”

“Surely you don’t wish to go against your host’s wishes?” With another charming smile that did strange things to her insides and sent moisture between her thighs, Cecil pushed off the desk, grabbed one of her hands and pulled her to her feet. “In fact, I insist on you doing nothing except enjoyable endeavors. Phoebe, I want you to remember every enchanted moment of your time away from the school. Even stubborn headmistresses must indulge in fancy every now and again.” A wicked twinkle appeared in the dark depths of his eyes.

Phoebe sucked in a breath as he brought her hand to his lips and placed a warm kiss on her middle knuckle. Tiny flames erupted into her blood. What did he mean by that? “I shall do the best I can.” Tremors rocked her stomach. Heat blazed through her body in a way it hadn’t done for years. Never would she forget her stay here, not when every touch, every glance, the pressure of his fingers gripping hers awoke feelings she thought long dead.

He leaned closer and placed his lips to her ear. “Try, for me. I’m quite certain the two of us older folk can find something interesting to keep us occupied.” When he pulled away, his grin was as wicked as that dratted glint.

“Perhaps.” And to think, she would risk this pleasant partnership by asking him at dinner this evening to consider a Christmas house party. Nothing like jumping into her new life feet first.

Chapter 4

Cecil hummed as his valet, Banks, selected a cravat from a drawer in the armoire. He was in an uncommonly jovial mood, and not because it was nearing dinner time.

Granted, he had an excellent cook, but the only difference tonight was the addition of Phoebe as well as Emily. Yet it wasn't his niece his mind dwelled on; it was the slender headmistresses with more than her fair share of generous curves in all the right places and her forward way of speaking that intrigued him with every word. "What color of tailcoat should I choose, Banks?" He held up a tan coat as well as one in sky blue, nearly the same color as Phoebe's eyes. "I must say I quite favor the blue." Though not because it paled when compared to the hue of her eyes. What would it take to see those orbs sparkle with life and humor? When she was gripped with strong emotion such as passion or desire, would they remain that color or would they deepen?

What sort of sounds would she make when kissed or caressed?

The valet turned with a snowy length of fabric draped over one arm. He regarded both coats and his somber expression didn't change. Which didn't mean much. Banks had traveled the world with him, more comfortable in a servant's role than that of a chum, and in all the years the man had been with him, Cecil had never seen him develop even a speck of humor. "Both are fine choices, sir. However, the blue is more dapper. Let me see if I can locate the gold waistcoat."

"Excellent." Cecil tossed the tan coat onto the back of a chair. He snagged the cravat from Banks before the man returned his attention to the armoire. "I'm pondering the intricacies of a knot tonight. Any suggestions?"

A huff of exasperation left the other man, muffled by the interior of the clothing cabinet. "It is a family dinner, sir. There is no need to present yourself as you would if you were going out socially."

Not even the valet's stodgy attitude could dim Cecil's enthusiasm.

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong." He strode over to the cheval glass then entered into the arduous process of twisting and folding the length of cotton into the particular design he wanted. "This dinner has one different element than an ordinary meal at home." With a few flourishes, Cecil finished his work. He frowned at himself in the glass. "It's the first dinner with Miss Pennyroyal. I want to make a favorable impression. She seems difficult to impress." Were his collar points too high? Not high enough? Would she notice the cravat or should he wear a stick pin? He wasn't a dandy by any stretch and he certainly didn't adhere to the ridiculous fashions that were sweeping through society, but he wished to look decent.

"Indeed, sir." Banks, with his back ramrod straight and his dark suit looking as if he'd just freshly pressed it, approached Cecil with the gold waistcoat in hand. "I'm certain Miss Bertrand will be quite glad you took the time to dress with care this evening. No doubt she wishes you well turned out for her guest too." He helped Cecil on with the vest then tied it at his waist.

Was that a joke? Cecil frowned again. Had Banks attempted to make a sarcastic comment? Regardless, he acknowledged the statement had been rather humorous. "Of course she will, my good man. Every young lady wishes her relatives to look decent and not embarrass them." He tugged on the bottom of the gold waistcoat. The green embroidered vines and the tiny bluebirds on the fabric gleamed in the candlelight, and with his fawn-colored trousers, he looked quite dashing. "In any event, I wish for the evening to go well. We are planning Christmas festivities." As Banks helped him shrug into the tight confines of the blue superfine jacket, Cecil grinned. "And it's been some time since I sat down to a formal table with anyone who wasn't a sailor or connected with trade. I rather think I'll enjoy myself."

"Very good, sir." Banks procured a lint brush then ran it along Cecil's sleeves. "Have a delightful dinner. And do try not to make a cake of yourself. I doubt the elder lady will appreciate it."

"No doubt you're right." Cecil nodded. She wouldn't like flattery. Plain speaking was best. He left his room and had made it midway around the second floor when Phoebe exited her room. For the first time in his life, he stood frozen in place, and all because of a woman. His pulse accelerated, and his palms went clammy at the same time. "Miss Pennyroyal." He forced a swallow into his tight throat. "Phoebe."

"Good evening, Cecil." She nodded, pausing outside her door, clearly waiting for him to catch her up. "You look a good sight better than when I first met you."

He came alive at the sound of his name on her lips and wished

they were alone and closeted in a forgotten room where she might be prevailed to say it again, this time in husky tones. His prick twitched and he attempted to marshal his thoughts. No sense in giving his body full rein, for she would see his attraction. Cecil closed the distance between them. "I'll take that as a compliment." Tonight she wore a gown of gray wool with the same long sleeves and high bodice the other one had. "You're a handsome woman." As before, her hair was caught back in the severe bun. What would it take for those tresses to flow free?

"You are quite a liar. I possess a looking glass and know exactly how I appear." A corner of her mouth tipped upward with a smile. That self-satisfied smirk tugged an answering grin from him. "Well past anything resembling youth, starting to collect wrinkles and my skin has long ago lost a glow."

"What gamin you speak." He gripped her upper arm and guided her down the first row of stairs. The faint scent of roses teased his nose, and the urge to bury it in her hair grew strong. He quelled it, shoving it to the very recesses of his mind lest he once more think about closeting her away in order to discover if her skin would smell the same. "You still retain much of the beauty you probably had in your Come Out days." The *tap tap* of her heels kept time as they traversed the corridor then went down the last set of stairs. "I'll wager you had young men vying for your hand back then."

"Oh, you'd be surprised." A tiny sigh escaped her as they gained the ground floor. "I'm not quite so high on the instep that I had a Come Out. Such things are reserved for people more important. Country dances and socials sufficed. I met my husband quite by accident sightseeing while in London with a group of scholars." She drew him to a halt but her hand lingered on his sleeve. "I long ago learned not to expect attention from the opposite sex. I was lucky my husband wanted me."

"Then you settled." Was hers an unremarkable union?

"Not exactly. I did love my husband, but ours was no grand passion, if that is what you're hinting at." She shrugged. "We were happy. That is a successful marriage."

"Perhaps." How very sad. A woman like Phoebe should always be made to feel vital, needed, cherished even. Cecil nudged her in the direction of the dining room. His chest tightened. He knew what rejection felt like and hated she'd had to experience it in any form. "Well, I'd wager if you had a Come Out today, you'd rival any Incomparable lady in all the *ton*." To his way of thinking, she was more gorgeous than any debutante or woman of legend alive. "Some women grow more beautiful with age, and you are proof of that." He couldn't stem the flow of his words even if he wanted. "It would seem

you've surpassed the first and even second bloom of youth." What was wrong with him? Hadn't he just vowed not to flatter her?

She swatted his arm, but the husky laughter that escaped her sent spikes of need through his chest. "How you do go on, but I thank you. It's not every day a woman receives such a support to her ego."

"You should, every day." He wanted to be the man to hold her and kiss her and tell her for the rest of her life how wonderful and still essential she was. "And dancing. I'll wager you're a natural on the floor, held securely in a man's arms." *Stop talking, man! You're in danger of babbling.*

One of her blonde eyebrows rose to her hairline. Amusement twinkled in her eyes. "Dancing has its place, but if I were you, I'd save my energy to get through dinner. I suspect you'll need it."

"Meaning?" He tried to draw her to a halt, but she wriggled from his grasp and entered the room ahead of him.

"Meaning, your niece and I have a topic of some import to discuss with you over dinner tonight, and it would behoove you to keep an open mind about it." She glanced at him from over her shoulder. Was that mischief sparkling in her gaze? "Also, remember Emily is almost of age for adult responsibilities. Your acceptance will go a long way into making certain her time here is positive."

Cecil attempted to puzzle out her exact meaning, but he was unsuccessful. With nothing else to do, he followed her into the dining room and took his customary place at the head of the long table that could seat ten people. Tonight, three place settings waited on one end. Phoebe and Emily had already settled. Both ladies stared at him with similar expressions of anticipation, and in Phoebe's case, apprehension. What could they possibly wish to speak with him about that seemed to have so much importance riding on it?

"This is a momentous occasion." he asked while Haynes brought out the first course of a cream of asparagus soup.

"How so?" Phoebe countered. With efficient movements, she picked up her spoon and tucked into her soup, bringing the utensil to her kissable lips and blowing gently on each bite.

The slight "o" formed by her lips captivated him. So easily he imagined her delectable lips wrapped around his member... Cecil firmly took himself in hand with a shake of his head even as his prick tightened and press against his breeches. He yanked his gaze from her mouth and focused it on his niece. "It's the first time I've had two such lovely ladies beneath this roof, let alone have them all to myself and gracing my table." He grabbed his spoon. "I rather like the view." Once again, his traitorous gaze strayed to Phoebe. A pretty blush stained her cheeks, and Cecil grinned. So, flattery did please her after all. "Emily, Phoebe tells me you have an important subject to discuss

this evening. Shall we begin the debate?"

Emily exchanged an anxious glance with the headmistress. "Last night, Miss Pennyroyal suggested you should let me host a house party for some of my local friends since my birthday is in a few days and it is Christmas." The girl looked at the older woman, and when she received an encouraging nod, she continued. "She said this would be an introduction of sorts into Brighton society and that it was still proper due to the holiday."

"I see." Though he would do anything for Emily, hosting a house party for a group of young people was not one of them. Not even for the Christmastide season. "I'm not certain that's such a good idea." Having more people in the house who were Emily's friends and contemporaries, all chattering at the same time? He suspected it would do horrible things to his peace of mind.

And would make finding time alone with his new obsession more impossible.

Emily pouted. She threw a dark look Phoebe's way. "You said he'd be receptive to the idea."

"No. I believe what I said was that it would be difficult to convince him, and so it is." Phoebe set her spoon down on the table and pinned Cecil with a glance no doubt honed from years of experience dealing with recalcitrant students. He quelled the urge to squirm in his seat, intimidated, but warmth spread through his veins from her regard. How could he convince her to look at him with heat lighting those remarkable eyes? "What about this plan do you find offensive, Mr. Tame?"

Dash it all. Back to formality. "It's not that I find it offensive. I merely see such an idea as a loss of sanity."

"It is the Christmas season. Emily should have her friends about her during this festal time," she countered.

The bit of soup he just put into his mouth tasted like paste as she continued to hold his gaze. He clung to his argument, like the bone-head he was. "There's simply not enough room in this house to host handfuls of young people."

"Stuff and nonsense, Uncle." Emily pushed away her mostly untouched bowl of soup. "You have two extra bedrooms since Uncle Alan and Uncle Avery haven't returned home. Plus, if you choose to be stubborn and won't make use of those rooms, I can fit three girls in mine, one sharing my bed and two others on a pallet on the floor."

He smashed the urge to roll his eyes. It would seem the girl had enough of her own stubbornness. "That doesn't do much for your cause. The noise level alone is off putting."

Phoebe softly cleared her throat. "If need be, I'm willing to host a few girls in my room."

“Why would you want to?” Cecil stared at her as if she’d just proposed jumping from the roof for entertainment. “After all, you spend most of the year with young ladies. Why would you want to have them populating part of your holiday?”

Perhaps she didn’t share the same wicked thoughts that he did.

A tiny smile curved her lips. “Actually, Emily and I were thinking she could invite young men as well. Make it a real house party and afford her a chance to properly shine within mixed society under our supervision, of course.”

Was the woman mad? “Absolutely not.” He dunked his spoon into his soup with enough force that some of the light green liquid splashed onto the tablecloth. The second boys were added to the mix, the house party became something else entirely. Christmas or not, such a thing wouldn’t happen beneath his roof. “I refuse to play host to young men on the prowl. Emily is too young for that sort of behavior. Plus, your reputation would be in danger as well, Phoebe. This matter is firmly settled.”

“Miss Pennyroyal, please do something,” Emily hissed from across the table. “He’s getting it all wrong.”

“Patience. A new strategy is needed,” Phoebe cautioned. She said nothing else for some time.

Cecil refused to entertain what her new campaign would consist of. The soup course passed in tension-filled silence. Emily had crossed her arms over her chest while Phoebe calmly finished her bowl of soup. He spent the time swirling his spoon through the thick liquid. By the time Haynes supervised the removal of the bowls as well as replacing them with the entrée, Cecil thought he might break apart from the silence. “Well, let’s hear it. I can almost see the plot forming in your brain.”

“I do not plot.” One of Phoebe’s eyebrows lifted. She took up a knife and fork then gingerly sliced into her roasted quail. “However, I do believe you are wrong on a few points.”

“Such as?” Not even the rich scent of roasted fowl with creamed potatoes could overcome the twisting in his stomach. She’d probably be more stubborn than he and Emily put together, and she would rout him if given enough time. The idea only intensified his interest in her, and he imagined years stretching out in front of him filled with good-natured banter and debate. Some discussions would heat and spill over into the bedroom, but then, what was the use of attaching himself to someone who couldn’t engage him on every level?

He shook his head, stunned once more by the direction of his thoughts. Attachment? Not quite. He only just met the woman, yet something about her couldn’t be forgotten. Beyond that, he wished to deepen their connection, if only to see if he’d be successful in plucking

the pins and combs from her hair.

"My reputation is sound. I have no reason to fear inappropriate attention from boys aspiring to be young bucks. I'm a widow besides, and that state affords me a bit more freedom than it does young ladies. Haven't you used that very reason to bring me into your household already?"

"Yes, but..." *That was to my advantage.*

She slipped a forkful of meat into her mouth, chewed then swallowed, following it with a sip of red wine. "Also, you have no reason to think that by inviting young gentleman to a house party of a few days, they'll compromise Miss Bertrand."

"I do, by experience. I was once their age and couldn't wait to bedevil the young ladies." He fought off the rush of warmth that raced up the back of his neck into his ears. And wasn't that what he was still, if his thoughts toward the headmistress were any indication?

Phoebe chuckled. "Yes, well, be that as it may, the house party is needed. That being said, perhaps you would unbend enough to chaperone and keep an eye on any young men we do invite. Provide a good example, Mr. Tame."

He gritted his teeth. Why would she not consent to saying his Christian name again? "Where would you have me put them?"

She pinned him with a look brimming with such steely determination he felt his willpower slip. "You could always give up your bedroom. Four boys could easily stay there. It's on the complete opposite side of the house from the rooms Miss Bertrand and I occupy, and most definitely not merely 'down the hall' as you had led me to believe. Or, barring that, you could house them in the front parlor. We shall set up an evergreen tree like they do in the Bavarian regions. Perhaps have a decorating party of an afternoon."

Emily clenched her hands but she said nothing, merely glanced between them with worried eyes.

"It's what they'll try to do when I'm sleeping that has me worried." Cecil cut up his bird until bits of it decorated his plate. He could eat none of it for his appetite had fled. "My answer is still no."

"Uncle, please!" Emily flounced from her chair. She threw herself onto her knees at his feet and clasped one of his hands in hers. "I rarely ask you for much."

Cecil snorted. "Ah, then I suppose three months ago when you wrote me begging me to bring you home a gown from America in their fashion, that was a rarity? Or last year when you whined until I gave you the ring I bought in France that I'd hoped to keep back for your Christmas gift?"

A blush stole across her face. "I was still a child then. Now, I'm nearly grown, and this would help launch me into Society. I'd be the

first girl in my class to play hostess, which would give me greater experience and people would remember my name.”

“So, because you’re almost an adult, I’m supposed to still cater to your every whim?” He let loose a chuckle. “Not winning your argument, my girl.”

“Don’t you love me, Uncle Cecil?” Her pout was no doubt designed to play off her looks and make members of the opposite sex run to do her bidding. How he loathed the day when she put it into play during courtship, which was exactly why he didn’t wish for young men to be underfoot. “After the stress of having Mother leave, surely you don’t mean to deny me in this? It’s the only thing I want for Christmas. And you don’t even need to get me a birthday present this year. I will never complain.”

“Careful, Miss Bertrand, doing it much too brown,” Phoebe warned. She continued to eat her dinner as if nothing of import occurred around her. Damn her even temper!

“Of course I love you.” He patted the top of her head like he’d done when she’d been a child. Yet she was no longer a child, this was true, and as such, he should treat her with more respect. “How would you keep your friends occupied in the event of rain? I rather doubt the heavens will open and the sun smile upon you just for this party. I cannot even guarantee snow, for England’s weather is fickle this year.” It had never recovered from events of the last year when the world never saw a summer.

“I’m sure we’ll find something. Games, or poetry readings, or we’ll talk. We’ll decorate the house, as Miss Pennyroyal said. Perhaps put together charity baskets.” Hope shone from her eyes. “Does this mean you’ll agree?”

Damn and blast. What sort of man was he if the bright-eye gaze of his niece reduced him to quivering porridge? “If I give up my bedroom, where will I sleep?”

Phoebe and Emily exchanged a purely feminine glance of triumph. How could they know he weakened? The headmistress said, “There is the parlor or perhaps your study would be more comfortable. Though I would put the boys downstairs, for if you have no control when it comes to a female wanting something from you, I rather doubt young men will either. I suggest you make camp near the staircase. Show them by example.”

Heat burned up the back of his neck. Example, indeed, when the bulk of his thoughts centered around bedeviling Phoebe into scandalous acts. With a grunt, he looked at her. “How do you know I’ll give in?” He’d barely decided to grant Emily’s request. How did Phoebe know his mind?

“Are you truly?” Emily clambered to her feet, her eyes sparkling.

Cecil heaved a sigh. When it came to Emily, apparently he couldn't bear to disappoint her, and neither could he deny his guest, for the pleading in her eyes was just as compelling. "Don't expect Cook to make you and your friends snacks and baked goods in excess and befitting the season. Prices of ingredients have risen sharply due to crop failure twice over. You won't be able to eat your way out of boredom."

"I don't care about that. We'll make merry regardless." She danced from foot to foot. "Does that mean you'll let me have the party?"

A trill of delighted laughter escaped Phoebe. The sound was so uplifting and unexpected that Cecil stared at her as his jaw dropped. "Miss Bertrand, have some pride after all. Don't appear quite so desperate."

He would give anything to hear that laugh again and often. "Very well. I give my permission for a Christmas house party." As Emily launched herself into his arms, he grunted once more. "However, for no longer than four days and invite no more than ten people. Let's hope they can accept your invite at such a late date. And you must mind what I and Miss Pennyroyal say without question. Understand?"

And don't come looking for us if I manage to spirit Phoebe away for a few stolen kisses.

"Yes. I'll do whatever you say. Thank you. Thank you!" She planted a kiss on his cheek, then released him and rushed to the other side of the table where she threw her arms around Phoebe's neck and hugged her. "Thank you for the idea, Miss Pennyroyal. I promise not to disappoint you in my deportment."

"You're certainly welcome." She extricated herself from the girl's embrace. "I expect you to be the perfect model of young womanhood. No sneaking off to rendezvous with a boy, no slipping through darkened corridors to try and steal a kiss." She sent a speaking glance his way, and he shifted in place. How the devil could she know his thoughts? "No playing pranks on me or your uncle, for if there's even a hint of mischief, I shall advise your uncle to send your friends home."

"I promise I won't do any of those things." Cecil doubted Emily's feet even touched the ground as she resumed her spot at the table. "Miss Pennyroyal, I think I adore you. I never thought you'd be so nice or willing to do anything exciting for one of your students."

"My dear girl, I'm willing to bet there are many things you don't know about me." Again, she looked at him, her blue eyes clouded with unreadable emotions. "Or any of the other teachers at your school." Another round of laughter escaped Phoebe, then both she and Emily chattered on about details of the party planning and gowns for dancing on Christmas night, their dinner forgotten quite forgotten in

the fervor.

Cecil sat back in his chair and couldn't help his grin. Watching his niece interact with Phoebe and appear to actually enjoy herself was a pleasant experience, but listening to Phoebe's laughter and seeing the grin that erased years from her face did strange things to his insides and had him wishing once more that they were alone. How much more animated would she be if he kissed her from prim and proper?

He vowed in that moment to endeavor to keep both the ladies in his life so happy. It was quite a novel feeling, and one he wanted to prolong. The knowledge Phoebe would only be in his house temporarily crept up and threatened to steal his joy. He tamped it down. Right now, he intended to live in the moment.

And that meant finding the opportunity to beguile her alone.

Chapter 5

Two days before Christmas

Cecil yanked his jacket on as he stared out the window.

It had been a day since that fateful dinner conversation where he promised Emily her house party. Now, in mere hours, the young people were due to arrive. How they'd managed to convince their own families to let them spend the Holy Day with his family instead of their own, he had no bloody idea, but for the love of Emily, he didn't question it. They would descend on his house. Like a hoard of locusts. Only singing bloody carols, through the rain as it were.

He cringed, imagining the endless chatter and noise, the pounding of footsteps up and down the stairs, not to mention the forced, nervous laughter that would invariably result from putting anxious mixed company together for what was likely their first real social event. Add to that the normal holiday festivities and he was already exhausted.

I must be mad to have agreed.

No, he knew exactly why he'd agreed. Cecil twitched the curtain open and gazed onto the street. Though still overcast, for once it wasn't raining. In fact, those fat, gray-swollen clouds could possibly portend snow. His spirits lifted slightly. Snow would make everything more bearable. Beyond the early morning empty street, the gray sea beckoned—a winter's sea; another good sign. He'd given Emily the go-ahead for her party for no other reason than Phoebe's smile. That little gesture had pushed him toward Bedlam faster than anything else he'd ever encountered.

And for the love of that smile, he'd gladly suffer the house party and everything it entailed. If luck favored him, he'd even steal that kiss he desperately wanted, perhaps acquaint himself with the feel of the headmistress in his arms.

I might need to employ mistletoe.

“Will you require your usual morning tea, sir?”

Cecil turned around at the sound of Banks’ voice. “Actually, I will, but first, I intend to walk the shore and take advantage of the lull in the weather.”

“Very well. Looks like snow now though. Ring me when you return.” He gave a modified bow then left the room.

Poor Banks. He wasn’t very cheerful so early in the morning. Cecil grinned. He’d need to become accustomed to the change in habit, for there was every chance with Emily’s friends underfoot, they would both need somewhere to hide.

And not just from Emily and her cronies. Oh no. Having Phoebe beneath his roof was proving to be too much a temptation. Already, his thoughts were saturated with her. During his quiet times, or even sitting across the table from her at meals, the overriding urge that gripped his brain was how to coax her to release her hair from its tight bun or how best to find himself in her presence somewhere around the house not easily accessible by Emily or the servants. If such an opportunity presented itself, he’d waste no time in stealing a kiss or pushing to explore her satiny skin. When he’d attempted to catch her alone in the last day, she’d managed to slip away, with an excuse on her lips or something urgent to attend to, but not without that glimmer in her eyes that urged him to try harder.

Which he intended to gladly do.

He shoved the possibilities from his mind. It was madness to dwell on such things, especially in the face of having way too many people in his house. *I’m addlebrained to think about an inappropriate romance.* With a guest in his residence, no less. Yet telling himself to stop thinking about her was like telling the rain to stop falling.

He snorted with derision. But then, the rain *had* halted for the time being, hadn’t it? Perhaps there was hope after all.

Right then. Twenty minutes later, he breathed in the salty air. Every time he returned home to Brighton, walking the shore was one of his greatest pleasures. It was no less so now. Would that it would snow. It would give Emily and her friends the perfect Christmas, even at the seashore, but the likelihood of that sort of precipitation happening was slim.

Even a few flakes then. He stopped short of pleading with the Creator. *Just to set a holiday mood* like he remembered from his childhood days in the north before his father relocated them to the south.

It didn’t matter, really. Christmas would come regardless of the weather.

Cecil concentrated on the here and now. In one hand, he carried

his boots and socks. A breeze blew over the water and left a chill behind and he was glad for his jacket's warmth. Despite the grayness that currently consumed his world, he adored the slap of the cool water against his calves, for he'd rolled the bottoms of his trousers up to his knees. The sand and tiny pebbles gave way beneath the soles of his feet, the sharp sting of them reminding him he was alive. No matter where in the world he went, there was no place like Brighton, and he would always return to these shores when calm was needed.

With a sigh, Cecil closed his eyes and lifted his face to the horizon where the sun would come up in a few minutes regardless of the cloud cover. He loved the breeze ruffling his hair, loved the tang of the salt on his lips, loved the sounds of the gulls and terns as they woke and took to the air. The soothing roar and rhythmic drone of the waves brought peace and order to his thoughts. For the moment, Brighton was where he needed to be, and he would pursue matters between him and the headmistress, for there was a spark between them.

When he opened his eyes, his heart stuttered, stopped and then surged to renewed life. Phoebe had appeared on the shore some way down from him and in the opposite direction that he'd walked.

If truth be known, his regard and curiosity for the woman had grown past desire and came dangerously close to something else. After a mere few days.

Botheration. This does not bode well. That was simply not possible. Such things didn't happen, and not to him. He had no need for a woman in his life, yet he couldn't tear his gaze from the fetching sight she made. What was more, she hadn't spied him as yet, so he looked his fill.

She'd lifted her maroon skirts. A peek of lace-trimmed petticoat fueled his imagination as did the glimpse of pale ankle and calf as she waded into the surf. What would her skin feel like beneath his lips if he were to shove up those skirts and explore that creamy expanse where her stockings ended? He raked his gaze along those exposed limbs and his mouth watered. Damn and blast but he must be far gone if this was what he thought about.

She remained oblivious to his perusal. It would seem she enjoyed the early morning shore the same as he. While the sight of the sea swirling about her legs filled him with gladness, it was her expression that made him catch his breath. For one, unguarded moment, Phoebe Pennyroyal looked blissfully happy, and that joy made her face glow as if lit from within.

God, she's beautiful. How did she ever think she was plain?

Cecil crept closer, hoping she wouldn't notice his approach. Her lips, slightly pink, curved upward with a genuine smile as she gazed out to sea. What did she think about? Did she long for adventure away

from England? The breeze clawed at her hair, and tendrils had come loose from her ever-present bun. They danced about her shoulders and nape in an inviting way that made him want to burrow his fingers through those strands. The ivory shawl around her rippled as the wind caught it. A snatch of laughter escaped her as she tried to hang onto a corner that pulled from her hand. Wonder of wonders, the gown she wore didn't feature a high neck. Oh no, the square bodice showed modest cleavage, restrained when compared with fashions of the day. He swallowed, but the movement couldn't alleviate his dry throat. Taken out of a school setting or even away from his dining room, she was magnificent.

And he wanted to know more about her. In all the ways that mattered. *Blast*. As impossible as it sounded, perhaps he was truly on the path to love.

Mother Nature cooperated and apparently agreed with him. The breeze ripped the shawl from her shoulders and sent it sailing down the shore toward him.

"Drat!" Her sentiment carried on the wind in his direction.

"Rather uncooperative weather we're having, eh Miss Pennyroyal?" he called to her. He would be forever grateful to that wind.

"Don't just stand there. Fetch my shawl before the sea claims it!" Lighthearted panic laced her voice.

"Your wish is my command." Cecil grinned as he chased the garment then scooped it up. The headmistress had a strain of feistiness in her veins. It made her even more interesting and fascinating. Would she show the same spirit behind closed doors? He shook the piece of wool and hoped the worst of the sand had fallen off. Phoebe's eyes lit briefly as she followed the shawl and eventually came close enough to him that they could converse without shouting. "I believe you requested I save the day?"

"I did, and thank you." She attempted to tuck a wayward tendril of hair behind her ear, but the breeze caught it and pulled it out of her fingers.

"Allow me to return your property." Cecil dropped his boots. He stepped closer, and with a flourish, whipped the shawl around her shoulders, gently tying the ends in a loose knot in front of her. He lingered longer than he should, leaning slightly into her. The faint scent of roses competed with the salty tang from the sea. It was intoxicating.

Phoebe cleared her throat. "Thank you, Cecil." She didn't move. Neither did he. "I hadn't anticipated the strength of the wind."

Now was the perfect opportunity. "Did you anticipate that we would eventually come to this?" he asked in a low voice, and moving

his hands up to cup her face, he touched his lips to hers in a hint of a kiss. He broke the brief embrace, even though her lips were as soft as he'd hoped, and looked at her. Would she protest?

Merriment danced in those sky blue depths. She laid a palm on his chest and he swore fire burned from the point of impact. "To be honest, I am surprised. I'm not the sort of woman to inspire men to passion."

"Then you haven't either thought of yourself in the right way or haven't met the right man." When he moved in for a repeat of the kiss, she edged away.

"Are you returning to the house?" Her glance skittered to his legs and lingered on his bare skin.

He felt her regard as keenly as if she'd caressed him with her fingers. "Actually, I'm not quite done with my morning walk." He retrieved his abandoned footwear with a glance to her feet. Such a high instep his headmistress had. "Where are your shoes?" He looked again and didn't see them anywhere on her person, but she had the most adorable feet. Feet he wanted to wash and dry and ultimately begin his seduction of her with a kiss to her toes.

"I left them up the shore. I'm afraid I've gotten into the habit of taking in the sea air before the bulk of the town awakes. It helps calm my mind before I need to face the students. Besides, who would want to abscond with my serviceable, scuffed boots?" She shrugged and the gesture drew his gaze to the slope of her bosom. "Only the hardy venture out in this chill. Most folks with half their sense are busy with Christmas preparations."

"Ah, but then most folks will forever miss out on the magic that is the sea." Not that he minded she'd joined him, especially not when each peek at her dainty pink toes had him fighting the urge to scoop her up into his arms and carry her to one of the nearby benches to protect her soles from scratches. "Since I am seeking the same calm, if you want company, I'd be happy to accompany you. I've been meaning to talk with you in a personal capacity since I met you at the school."

"Oh?" Once more she tucked a strand of wayward hair behind her ear and once more the wind clawed it into the air.

"Absolutely. Despite what you assume to be true, I find you fascinating." *Obviously, since I forget myself with that damned brief kiss.*

Phoebe rolled her eyes. "Despite what you say in flattery, I think walking with you would be acceptable." She slipped her hand through the crook of his elbow and allowed him to lead her back the way she came. They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes, and in those precious moments, Cecil imagined the whole of his life with her by his side, her hair wild, her eyes twinkling, her cheeks flushed.

Finally, she broke the quiet. "Why is that?"

"Why is what, my dear?" he asked, distracted, for he couldn't think of much beyond pulling her behind the first set of breakers they came to and proceeding to kiss her senseless.

She snorted. "Talking to me. I cannot imagine I hold any sort of interest for a man like you."

"A man like me?" He attended her words more carefully. "What sort of woman do you assume would catch my eye?"

A trill of laughter escaped her and filled his ears with the wonderful sound. Once more he was enthralled. The burst of laughter blended with the crash of the waves that never would he be able to separate them. "You're a well-dressed gentleman, so it would only stand to reason you'd want an equally turned out lady on your arm."

"Of which you could be if you'd dress yourself in decent gowns," he gently inserted.

"You're well-traveled. No doubt you're searching for a woman who has an interest in seeing the world."

"I'll wager you have that interest, Phoebe, but you choose to cling to these shores with but a flimsy excuse."

"Yet you're older and with a nearly of-age niece, which says you're not dangling after debutantes," she continued as if he'd not interrupted her.

Oh, she was a delightful baggage, and he looked forward to disabusing her of her very wrong notions. "My dear, you may have efficiency and intelligence on your side, but I'm afraid only one of your guesses is correct."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Not able to pat her hand while still carrying his boots, he nudged her hip with his, and was rewarded by a barely audible gasp. He smiled. Did her mind jump to the wonders to be found when men and women matched undulating hips? "No matter what I choose to wear, it doesn't mean I want a counterpoint who cares only for how she's garbed on the outside. I'd much prefer a woman who drapes her soul in goodness."

"Yet you said I should wear more becoming gowns," she pointed out in a tone of victory.

"Only because you have charms enough that the right man would like to see them." Again, he bumped her hip, and she bumped him back. "I do enjoy traveling the world, and yes, I'd like a woman who had an adventurous streak, for she would accompany me, but if she didn't, I'd endeavor to entertain her with stories and bring her the world that way."

"You are charming enough to paint those pictures with your words," Phoebe conceded.

He nodded. "And finally, you are correct about the debts. I much prefer a woman with experience who knows what she wants, and employs her mind to chase after it. A woman of intelligence who will challenge me at every turn is preferable."

The sound Phoebe made was reminiscent of a sigh. She softly cleared her throat. "I wish you luck in finding her. The woman you select will have a fine life indeed."

His grin widened at the breathless quality of her voice. Did he put her off balance with his list that fit her so well? He hoped so, and now he'd indulge in forthrightness, just as she did. "Oh, I think luck has already shined upon me, for if I had to choose a woman perfectly suited to me, it would be you."

"Me?" The word sailed out on a squeak.

"Yes, but that would mean I'm getting ahead of myself. The excitement of possibility urges me to rush things." He bumped her hip with his again. "For the time being, I merely want to discuss the topics you and I are both interested in, perhaps indulge in a good debate or two, then see where the tides of fate take us."

And he wanted a proper kiss, one that would show her the depths of his regard.

"We shouldn't converse or even be alone with each other without a companion. Only engaged people are allowed to talk unrestricted or even hold hands, gloves on of course. Yet here we are, strolling the shore, in various states of undress—at least on your part—alone as can be, with our arms almost linked, hips bumping, walking closer than propriety allows." She paused. "My widowhood notwithstanding."

The back of his neck burned. She'd noticed his rolled up trousers. Did that mean she found him pleasing? "Forgive me, but I don't see the problem." Hadn't he been waiting for an opportunity to have her all to himself?

A tiny smile pulled at her lips. "Frankly, neither do I as much as I wanted to warn you."

So intent was he to convince her, he forged ahead. "Plus, it's early in the morning. There is no one about, we both enjoy taking a good walk, the exercise affords us the opportunity for talking, and all my intentions are honorable." Most of them. Then her words sank in. "You agree?"

"Yes." She stared at him before hiding her eyes by sweeping her lashes down.

"Oh." At sixes and sevens now, he floundered. "Surely the local rumormongers won't find fault in what I've proposed." Though they'd be properly scandalized if they knew he wanted to tumble her into his bed.

"You'd be surprised. I thought we'd set them quiet by my staying

at your house. Now I suspect we've made a misstep."

That was an understatement. "Well, I do have need of you... for many things." He didn't feel inclined to clarify exactly how, and neither did he want to remind himself that her time with him was temporary. That particular sticking point could be rectified if he put his mind to pursuing a courtship, but he wouldn't do anything unless she agreed to ideals beyond conversation and debate.

A small sigh escaped her. "Be that as it may, I should probably go on ahead, despite what I wish. You can finish your walk and arrive later. We must set an example for Emily, after all." She attempted to tug her hand from his arm, but he grabbed her fingers and held on. "What are you doing?" She glanced from their hands to his face.

"I'm not certain." Truly, he had no idea. Being near her had addled his mind and did strange things to his chest, his prick, his heart. "For the love of God, then, do me the honor of becoming my wife."

"I beg your pardon?" Phoebe drew to a halt, forcing him to do the same. She stared at him with her lips parted and rosy color staining her cheeks. Her eyes went wide. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

He wasn't sure if those words actually came out of his mouth. *I've got bacon for brains*. Somehow, he had to explain his odd request. Cecil cleared his throat. "If our unmarred state is the only impediment in allowing me to have a conversation with you while alone and away from prying eyes or the threat of being overheard, marry me. Let's become engaged for the simple reason I wish to talk with someone of my own age before the gaggle of Emily's friends descend on my house."

"You don't mean it." She opened and closed her mouth, and then she moistened her lips and spoke. "We're not in love. I'm not a great beauty, and neither of us has been compromised. I see no reason why we should wish to wed."

"Can you not, just for once, do something completely out of the ordinary and not logical?" When she remained silent, he shook his head and moved them forward once more. Perhaps this was merely a bump in his path. "Let me further explain. I used to believe in destiny. Once upon a time, I stupidly went through life thinking the best of people and situations. At one time, I had hoped to be married and have a family by this point in my life."

She tightened her grip on his arm. "Why didn't you?"

"Many things. I suppose I found my travels much too exciting to stay in one place for too long. The war interrupted both my personal life and touring the world for a while. The need for female companions—domestication if you will—sat at the back of my mind, never urgent."

“Yet you’re ready for that step now?” Undisguised interest hung in her voice. “With me?”

“Very much so, but is it fair of me to want that level of contentment in my life when I saw many of my friends die on the battlefield or through other follies all over the world? Now, there is the worry for my sister and the fear she’ll not recover from the dark place she’s gone.” Why had he felt the need to reveal those things to her when he’d never said them to another soul? Something about Phoebe invited his trust, and that hadn’t happened for a very long time. The fact he could envision her by his side spoke volumes and set fire to his sanity. “How do I justify being happy?”

“Sometimes there is no way to justify such a thing.” She pulled away from him only to go further into the surf, her skirts hoisted in both hands. The froth swirled about her calves. She wriggled a foot and in so doing, gave him a tempting glimpse of ankle, of calf, almost a knee and he shuddered with need to see the rest of her unclothed. “Horrible things happen in the world, but we still need to have hope. It’s all right to live your life and yet remember those who have gone before. No one will think ill of you for that.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it until I returned to Brighton.” *And lost my head when I saw you.* Cecil dropped his boots then waded out into the surf with her. The cold water sent gooseflesh racing over his skin, but he didn’t mind. It cooled his overheated body. Being near Phoebe would have him ready to burst into flames in seconds if he wasn’t careful.

“What made the difference?”

“You.” No good would serve him with a lie.

“Such gammon.”

“No. You’re different. You don’t mince words. You speak your mind.” He smiled. “Do you know how refreshing that is?”

“Perhaps.” She glanced at him from over her shoulder—the perfect image of a sea witch. “Do you not come back to Brighton from time to time? I had nothing to do with it.”

You had everything to do with it the second I stepped into that school. “This time was different.”

“Why? Nothing of import happens in Brighton.” She shrugged and one side of her shawl slid down a shoulder. The creamy patch of bosom tempted him. “At least, it doesn’t to me.”

Cecil exhaled a shuddering breath. When he drew in his next, he turned her to face him. “I met you. Ran full-on into you in the hallway of that school.” He gave into the urge and cupped her cheek. “I cannot explain it, but you are changing my mind, even now, on many subjects. Haven’t you convinced me to let Emily have a house party?”

“Yes, but—”

He rushed on. "After I met you, I've entertained thoughts I've never seriously considered would be possible before." He licked his bottom lip. Salt came away on his palate as he dared to be wicked. "I want you, plain and simple, the way a man desires a woman. And for much more."

What did other men do after laying bare their innermost thoughts?

"Oh?" A shiver racked her body and transferred up his arm. "I had no idea I could inspire such passion or feeling in anyone, especially after only knowing you for such a short association." Was that pink color on her cheeks due to the sea breeze or from his revelation? "I mean, I felt the connection between us, but—"

Better and better. Perhaps he wasn't insane after all. "Sometimes, in order to be truly happy, we merely have to take a mad chance." *Please God, let it be the right time.*

"And you wish for your chance to be... with me?" Shock filled her voice but her eyes glowed with the same need plaguing his system.

"Yes." He cupped her other cheek and gingerly cradled her face in his hands. A quick glance down the shore confirmed they were still alone. "Phoebe?"

"Yes, Cecil?" Her voice was little more than a whisper. She darted the tip of her tongue out and wet her bottom lip.

His pulse pounded in his temples and thundered in his ears. Never had he been so nervous or as excited or as full of desire as he was now. Yes, he'd kissed other women before in his lifetime, had even dallied with a couple of them years ago, but this was different. Phoebe was different. What he was about to attempt—about to suggest after he claimed a proper kiss— was pure madness. "Will you please grant permission for me to kiss you?"

"You already did." Her voice shook as she held his gaze. Questions and an invitation lingered in those blue depths.

"I mean a proper, mind-numbing, leave-you-senseless, show-you-how-I-feel, deuced proper kiss," he explained and drew the pad of a thumb along the plump flesh of her bottom lip.

She shuddered and briefly closed her eyes. "Actually," the tendons in her neck worked with a hard swallow. "I believe that would be the next logical step."

Chapter 6

Phoebe feared her knees would fail to support her as she held

Cecil's deep brown gaze. Brandy flecks swam in those depths, each one adding to the mystery of the man himself.

The touch of his hands on her face and the warmth of his fingers on her skin did strange things to her insides. She forgot about the chill in the air, the coolness of the water, the fact anyone could come upon them, and she trembled in his hold, but he didn't move. Instead, he stared into her eyes; his roiled with heat and promise, and she shivered again with anticipation. "I believe I gave you permission to kiss me." A kiss that would no doubt be soul-altering. "Have you changed your mind?" How brazen she'd become since meeting him. The thought provoked a smile. Perhaps that wasn't the worst thing. It had been a long time since she'd felt vital and needed as a woman and not merely for her skills as a mother or a headmistress.

Bloody hell, but she wanted—needed—that promised kiss.

"Oh Phoebe." He dropped a chaste kiss on her forehead and her heart squeezed. "No. I haven't changed my mind." His soft words sent spikes of need down her spine and sailing into her core. His sensual mouth curved upward with a grin. "I was simply enjoying sharing this moment with you. It's as if we're standing on the precipice of something wonderful and exciting. There will be no turning back." He lowered his voice even though they were alone. "And I want more than just a kiss."

The frantic trip of her heartbeat marked the time. "I want that too." *Dear Lord, please don't let me make a fool of myself or do anything to compromise my position at the school.*

"Regardless of your reputation? For if you are worried, I won't do anything to compromise you." His expression sobered. "I think too much of you for that."

A piece of her heart went into his keeping. "We are old enough to be discreet." She ignored the chill of the surf pushing against her

calves. How silly she must look, holding her skirts out of the water while he cradled her with a very intimate gesture, their bodies barely touching. But her silly heart trembled from his words and his erotic intent. For one fleeting moment, she let herself hope in the magic of such things and where they might lead. "I think you don't give yourself enough credit, Cecil. You're a romantic." How refreshing to find a man who thought thusly.

"Perhaps I am. But truly, at this moment, my mind is not on romance. I'm very much fixated on plundering your sweet mouth." Then he lowered his head and touched his lips to hers.

If Phoebe thought she'd been prepared for his overture, she was sadly mistaken. This kiss was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. His lips, so warm and firm against hers, sent tingles through her body, and she forgot to hold her skirts out of the water. Instead, she gripped his shoulders as he pulled her closer even as he broke the kiss and peered into her face. "Why did you stop?" She hadn't wanted to separate from him so soon. And definitely not until she'd tasted her fill of him.

"I don't want to scare you away." He said it with such reverence her heart skipped a beat.

"Silly man, I'm made of much sterner stuff." A strong wave slapped her legs and bumped her more fully into his arms to land against his solid chest. "Oh, dear heavens."

"My sentiments exactly." Cecil slid one hand to her waist but furrowed the other into her hair. He plucked the remaining pins from her wild tresses and claimed her lips again.

Phoebe sighed and leaned—nay, melted—into him as he gently kissed her. When he nibbled at one corner then drew his tongue along the seam of her lips, a host of butterflies broke out in her belly. Tingles danced over her skin, and she slipped her arms around his neck, the fingers of one hand combing the silky hair at his nape. How much did she adore the solid, muscled feel of a man? She marveled at how well she fit into the circle of his arms and rejoiced at how welcoming and right those same arms felt holding her. With a boldness she could hardly believe, she returned the kiss.

As she parted her lips, he slipped his tongue inside her mouth to tangle with hers. Tiny fires erupted through her bloodstream. Languid heat slid into her core. With a moan, she held him closer and explored the warm wonder that was his mouth, chased his tongue as if her life depended on winning that duel.

Dear God, never had she felt like she'd shatter from a mere kiss. But then, Cecil wasn't a mere man. She broke away only to pepper his cheeks, his chin, the tip of his nose with frantic pecks, and when he laughed and drew his lips along the side of her neck, she once more

clung to him as if her bones had dissolved into pudding.

"Cecil..." Her eyelashes fluttered when he licked and nibbled at the sensitive skin behind her earlobe.

"Hmm?" The firm pressure of his hands at the curve of her buttocks and the insistent press of his burgeoning member into her stomach worked to drive her need to heightened frenzy.

"We are..." Oh, bother. Desire rose within her and she shamelessly brushed her aching breasts against his chest. The movement didn't assuage a bit of her want. Through the haze that had descended on her brain, one fact remained: they were not in private, and as much as she wished to burrow her hands beneath his clothing to explore his hard chest, she could not. "Cecil, we must desist."

Despite the urges of her body, the logical side of her brain intruded. They were out on the shore where anyone could come upon them, a bevy of young people were due to arrive at his house within the next few hours, her skirts were becoming heavier, wetter and colder by the minute, and she really didn't need a romance to complicate her life at the moment, especially not to an adventurer such as Cecil. Though his pretty words of earlier had tickled her heart, she harbored a few qualms that he actually would stand by them in the event he wasn't saddled with his niece any longer.

I won't give my heart to a man who doesn't intend to remain in England.

Not that there was anything more profound between them than the heated, erotic connection. With a sigh of regret, Phoebe pulled away from him. Without the warmth from his body, a shiver rippled up her spine. Her lips tingled and her breath was suspiciously labored, but she couldn't hide her smile. "As kisses go, that was an acceptable attempt." *Oh, bother.* That hadn't been what she'd wished to say at all. "I meant to say, I rather enjoyed that kiss." Her cheeks heated with the admission. "And I wouldn't mind a repeat performance or something a bit more... tempting." *Dear heavens, that certainly wasn't what I'd wished to say aloud!*

Cecil's grin was as wide as hers as he stooped down and retrieved his boots once they'd both moved out of the surf. "Perhaps one or both requests can be arranged once the household settles." The breeze ruffled his hair and threw it into helter skelter waves that begged for her fingers to tame. "Shall I escort you back to your shoes then? Unless you'd like to repeat the kiss now? It's still rather early for anyone else to walk the shores." He cocked one of his eyebrows while his eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Um, yes, I mean no. I mean, yes you can escort me, but no we shouldn't kiss again. Yet." The flush moved from her face down her neck and into her chest. A tremor of need rocked her core and she

clenched her thighs together in an attempt to prolong the sweet sensation. What was it about the man that discomfited her so? And what did it say about her that she was in danger of becoming obsessed with him?

"Seeing you at sixes and sevens pleases me. It means I've affected you more than you're letting on. Confusion brought on by kissing looks like heaven on you."

"Such cheek," she murmured, but she grinned nonetheless even as her body strained for his touch. This man was good for her psyche.

"You wouldn't want anything less." He offered her his arm, and when she threaded her hand through his crooked elbow, he led her down the shore. "Also, as full disclosure, you're a veritable siren with your hair down. Thank goodness for the wind who was of a like mind as me."

"I... I don't know how to respond." The pleasant flutters that tormented her belly during their kiss faded with every step that brought them closer to the townhouse. The likelihood of finding herself in his arms again was slim. *I should have kissed him more just now.* "How many young people are we expecting?" It was probably best to change the subject else she'd go mad with need for him. The flex of his muscle beneath her fingers reminded her of the way his arms had felt around her, and she fought off another shiver. "I'm hoping for not more than five."

"If I know Emily, she's hinted to everyone she knows about this house party even though I specifically gave her a number of ten." His laughter rumbled in his chest before it escaped into the air. "But this will be good for her and will take her mind off her mother for a while. And holidays are for gathering friends close. Thank you for suggesting it."

"You are quite welcome." With her free hand, she attempted to tuck locks of hair behind her ear, but the wind whipped them about her face anyway.

"Leave it free, Phoebe. You're enchanting," he murmured as they walked. "Would that I could delve my fingers through those strands."

Heat shot through her body once more. "Cecil, please."

"Please do such an erotic thing?" he teased with a bump of his hips. "Shall I whisk you away to a broom closet and have my wicked way with you?"

Yes, definitely. She shook her head. "Behave. You act like a rogue." *What is wrong with me? I shouldn't want him as much as I do.*

"Where is the fun in that, my dear?" But humor rang through his voice. "Perhaps in this instance I wish to be."

She smiled. Best keep them on course. "Have you thought about what you'll do if her mother doesn't return?" She hated to bring up

sad topics so soon after the delicious things they'd shared, but it was always good to be prepared.

"I'll take Emily in permanently, of course. She is family." He remained silent so long, Phoebe feared she might have offended him. Then, he sucked in a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "Having her friends, both male and female, around will keep life and laughter in the house. Though Emily tries to hide it, but she's lost some of the zest she had. Although, I suppose all they'll want to do is spy on each other if the weather is warm enough for sea bathing, or run races down the middle of the street in the dead of night while tied at the ankle, or find any excuse to brush against each other."

"Can you blame them?" She took the initiative and bumped his hip. There were certain advantages of being a widow, after all. "Isn't that why you walked the shore with me this morning and even kissed me?"

Cecil cleared his throat. When she shot a glance his way, a slight tinge of red graced his face. "Perhaps, but that's different. You and I are older. We know better and understand where such things might lead."

"Why is it different? Can we not feel a rush of feeling for another person despite our ages?" She was deliberately goading him, yet a tiny part of her wanted him to agree with her. "Are you under the impression that once the first, or even second, blush of youth passes, we cannot find pleasure in another's company in a physical way?"

"We can, but don't you think it's madness? We need to set a good example for Emily and her friends."

"We do, but I must say, I wouldn't mind meeting you again if the conditions were right and we were alone."

"As long as the young people are not aware. I am many things, but I won't provide further anxiety for my niece, despite our mutual regard."

"I see." Then she was merely an object of dalliance when time permitted? Phoebe lifted an eyebrow. Mayhap she'd read the whole situation wrong. "Perhaps the idea of any other impromptu kisses should be stifled, in light of your statement. Why provide a temptation if the young set will look to us for guidance?" Cold disappointment circled through her insides, and she chastised herself for nearly falling for him. Of course he was right. They had to deny their base instincts for the greater good. After all, the kiss they shared was an aberration for them both. And she wasn't here for flirtation or even a romance. She was here to oversee Emily until such time as a more permanent companion could be found.

"Why indeed." The words were dull and flat. They walked in silence for some time. Finally, he spoke again. "Tell me about your

husband. You hinted that meeting him had been quite by accident. Were you not looking to wed at the time?"

"It was an accident." The memory tugged a smile from her and served as a distraction from the man beside her. "I was in London at the time, working as a history teacher in one of the schools there. He was a bookseller, and had lost his way on one of the streets. He'd only just arrived, you see, and when he rushed around a building, he ran right into me as I was conducting a tour of architecture with one of my classes."

"Do you make it a habit to crash headlong into the men you'll eventually marry?"

She sucked in a shallow breath. "I beg your pardon?" He'd proposed to her earlier but only as an excuse to talk alone with her. There was no love behind the request. When he didn't comment further, she let it out. Did that mean he wanted to marry her and take on all that a union would entail or had he not been aware of what he'd said? *Stop overthinking every little thing.* Yet warmth lingered around her heart at the idea. "I do not crash into men on purpose. Perhaps it's more a matter of the men in my life behaving recklessly and without manners."

"Or else, upon meeting you, every bit of common sense they've had flees and they can think of nothing except throwing all that they are into wooing you. And of inventing creative ways of finding themselves alone in your company." Cecil kept his gaze focused straight ahead. "Regardless, pray continue. Was it love at first sight?" His voice sounded tight, guarded. Was it jealousy that roughened his words?

She snorted with laughter and gave up trying to deny what she felt for him. "Hardly. I chastised him for his carelessness, gave him the direction of the lending library he needed then went on about my business. It wasn't until later I realized I'd lost my reticule." A grin pulled at her lips. "He brought it around to the school the next day since I'd carried a few calling cards inside with the name and address of that institution."

"Ah, then you were so grateful for the reticule's return that you took pity on him and said yes to dinner?"

"No. Honestly, I didn't find him attractive in that way." It might make her seem shallow or aloof, but it was the truth. "He asked, but I turned him down. Frank, being Frank, continued on. He visited the school every day without fail for two weeks, always with a flower or some other token gift."

A chuckle left Cecil's throat. "In other words, he wore you down."

"Yes."

"You have to admire a man for his persistence."

“Perhaps.” She’d eventually given in and accepted an outing with him from sheer exhaustion of refusing. “We courted for a year. After that, he asked for my hand since both of my parents are deceased.”

“Let me guess.” He glanced at her with a sober expression. “You refused the first couple of times.”

Embarrassment heated her cheeks. “I did, as a matter of fact. I was convinced I didn’t need a man in my life since I’d gotten along without one for so long, and that I needed a marriage even less.” She tightened her grip on his arm and rather enjoyed the flex of his muscles beneath her hand. “But, he was a dear sort, and a good man if a bit scatter-brained. I said yes because I did like spending time with him, and...”

“Yes?”

Good heavens, if she blushed any harder she’d need to run into the sea merely to save her life. Why, oh why, did she blurt out such a thing knowing she’d have to finish the thought, knowing that he wouldn’t let it go? Well, there was nothing for it. “I was curious about what went on in the marriage bed.”

Cecil laughed long and loud. “I assume it was everything you dreamed it would be?”

Despite herself, she joined in his laughter. “Mostly. He was everything polite and gentle in relations. But I’d wished there’d been more... excitement in our times together.” *Stop talking!*

He bumped her hip with his. Tingles tripped up her spine and spread throughout her core. “My dear Phoebe, have you any clue how adorable you are, how very delicious?”

“That is debatable, as I’ve already discussed with you.” She smiled nonetheless. Perhaps she wasn’t as silly as she suspected. These things were simply part of life as anything else.

“Do you think you’ll ever marry again?”

She looked at him, and the sharp interest in his dark eyes set her heart pounding. “I suppose I might if the right man were to ask.”

“Well, I did already, you know.” He cocked a dark eyebrow.

“That wasn’t in earnest.” Her pulse jumped another notch.

“Only time will tell.” He leaned into her, put his lips to the shell of her ear then whispered, “When a pair courts while older, they have experience on their side, which means what happens between the sheets is ever so much more satisfying.”

“Mr. Tame!” She pulled away from him in shock even as her nipples tightened with need. “That is hardly proper conversation.” The thought of throwing herself into the sea for the cooling effect took hold once more.

“I beg your pardon.” His grin didn’t dim. The dratted man wasn’t the least bit sorry.

“Rogue.” But she couldn’t help her answering smile.

“Perhaps.” He winked. “Thank you for the story.” He didn’t reach to reclaim her hand, and she regretted the loss of his warmth.

“What about you, Cecil? Do you wish to marry at your ripe old age?” Belatedly, she remembered they’d already discussed a bit of his reasoning for not already wedding.

“Absolutely. I don’t mind the idea of leg-shackling myself to a woman, especially if she’s as delightful and prone to blushing and honest revelations as you are, even at such an advanced age.” He shot her a look that positively brimmed with mischief and wicked promise. “Also, I am very curious to see how a woman like that will act in the bedroom, and if she’ll let down her hair.”

She sucked in a tiny gasp. “Cecil! You overstep.” *My goodness, what a cake I’m making of myself.*

“Life is short, love. Isn’t it best to get straight to heart of one’s wants and desires?” When he winked, Phoebe stumbled.

“Oh, dear heavens, you must stop talking about this.”

“Why? We have both felt that connection between us.”

“Yes, but... but...” She pressed her fingers to her blazing cheeks. Her wet skirts slapped against her legs as she walked. “I thought you wished to set a good example for Emily and her friends.”

“Since they aren’t here with us at the moment, I felt the need to be daring.” He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing the back. “As I said before, I desire you, Phoebe. There is nothing scandalous about that.”

“Perhaps.” She forced down a swallow, and deciding she had nothing to lose, she said, “But perhaps how I wish to respond and what I’m thinking are quite scandalous.”

For several seconds he stared at her with a smile curving his sensuous lips and speculation in his eyes. “Thank you for a delightful morning, Miss Pennyroyal. I cannot recall a time when I’ve enjoyed myself so much.”

“You’re most welcome. I had a lovely time as well.” She frowned as they approached the stretch of beach front near his home. Her boots and stockings still rested on the sand where she’d left them. Their outing together was over, as was their honest, heat-laden conversation. Disappointment pressed on her shoulders. “I guess that’s that.”

“It would seem so.” He lingered longer than necessary with his grip on her hand. “However, this won’t be the last of our meetings.” Finally, he released her as there were a few other people walking the shore. “Do you want to return to the house ahead of me?”

“I think you should instead. Emily’s friends should arrive soon, and you’ll probably want to absorb the quiet while you can.” Unshed tears

collected in a ball in her throat. Why in the world did she feel like crying simply for parting ways with this man? It wasn't as if she'd not see him again. In fact, once they both changed and cleaned up from their walk, they'd undoubtedly meet over the breakfast table.

Breakfasting as a guest wasn't the same as forever.

"You're probably right." He glanced over at the house then back at her. The sadness in his expression mirrored hers. The breeze ruffled his hair, giving him a boyish appearance. "I suppose I'll talk with you later."

"Yes. It's inevitable since we do reside beneath the same roof, and you did promise another scandalous meeting."

"I did. Perhaps a midnight assignation on Christmas night?"

"Perhaps." A tremble moved down her spine. She pushed at his shoulder. At this rate they'd linger forever, and that would lead to other... things... they couldn't indulge in. "Go on, now. We don't want to invite unnecessary gossip."

He nodded. With a forlorn wave, Cecil headed in the direction of the house. His long-legged strides carried him over the sand then the street and finally over the short lawn to his door. He didn't look back. Which was a good thing, for he had, she'd have pelted after him in an effort to remain in his company.

Phoebe heaved a sigh as she bent to retrieve her boots and stockings. The man was a good conversationalist, a decided tease and a very real threat to her peace of mind. Just thinking about the touch of his hand on hers, his lips against hers and how safe and cherished she'd felt in his arms sent tingles of delight through her. And churned more than desire through her veins.

Drat. I think I'm tumbling down the slope into love with him.

It went against her common sense and logic, but there it was. A reluctant smile tugged at her lips as she turned toward the house. There were worse things to fall into.

Chapter 7

Christmas Eve

“W ill this bloody rain ever stop? There’s nothing to do.”

Emily pecked at the window with a fingernail, then she huffed a breath on the glass and drew a sad face in the cloud that remained behind. Her pink muslin dress brightened the gloom of the day. “I knew this house party was a horrid idea.”

Phoebe rolled her eyes. She fussed with her ivory shawl and wished she’d worn something prettier than the serviceable brown wool day dress, but there was a chill in the air and she couldn’t leave the wool behind simply for fashion—or the chance to see the light of interest in Cecil’s eyes. “You were eager enough for it yesterday afternoon when your friends arrived.”

As soon as the ten of them descended, the chattering noise commenced and had only stopped when the party had gone to bed last night. After which, she’d fallen eagerly into bed with a dog-eared Gothic novel she hated to part ways with in the early hours of the morning. Even now the thrilling book waited for her tucked away beneath her handkerchiefs and stockings in a drawer. Despite her love of reading, the tale had done nothing to prevent her mind from wandering to her host.

“Irrelevant, Miss Pennyroyal.” Annoyance sat heavy in the young woman’s voice. “Now, I’m bored.”

Emily had been whining non-stop for the last twenty minutes. Phoebe rubbed her temples where a slight headache brewed. Despite her thoughts or the weather outside, she was still a headmistress and in charge of guiding the younger lady. “Regardless, watch your language, Miss Bertrand. A proper young lady doesn’t say such things.” Of course, it was beyond ridiculous to keep reminding the girl of such things since she apparently only said them for shock value.

“A proper young lady is never bored to tears due to never-ending rain a day before Christmas, when there should be snow, or at least the hope of it. We cannot even walk the shore.” She turned around and flounced back to the settee where two other girls sat with a great deal more decorum than Emily exhibited.

“You could continue to decorate the house,” Phoebe said. Shortly after the young people had arrived, they’d thrown themselves into fashioning paper chains and bedecking doorways with ribbons and glass baubles and tin bells.

“That’s boring, and we did that already besides,” Emily groused. “We need something new.”

Phoebe sighed. “How about we play a couple of parlor games? That’s fun during Christmastide. If you can convince the other girls to come down, we’d have a good number.” She glanced toward the door as Cecil and a few young men entered the drawing room. “Good morning, gentlemen.”

The boys mumbled greetings then sat as far away from the girls as they could get. Cecil chuckled and took a seat on a settee opposite Phoebe.

“I just suggested parlor games to Emily. Would you be interested in joining?” she asked if only for the excuse of looking at him. His cream-and-gray striped trousers matched perfectly with an ivory waistcoat embroidered with fleur-de-lis and topped off with a gray jacket that hugged his shoulders to perfection. Would that she could slide her fingers over those shoulders and down his chest she already knew was solid and muscled. “At least games will pass the time until luncheon.” *And keep my mind from you.*

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you Miss Pennyroyal?” Emily pinned Phoebe with a glare. “You’re already taking up too much of Uncle Cecil’s attention when he should be focused on me since it’ll be my birthday in a couple of days.”

Apparently, manners and her tenuous bond with Emily didn’t have the strength to stand against adolescent boredom. “I apologize. That wasn’t my intention.” *What a liar I’ve become!* She did wish to spend as much time with Cecil as she could, for soon she would leave. “And truth to tell, I’ve merely spent minutes in your uncle’s company instead of the vast amounts of time you assume.” With the exception of their walk on the shore yesterday or dinner every night since her arrival, Phoebe hadn’t sought him out for fear she’d grow too fond of his company. *Fat lot of good that did.* She already thought of him more than she should, and with every breath, her body strained to know his touch. *Have my own silly desires put Emily into shadow?*

“That’s enough, Emily.” The stern tone in Cecil’s voice invited no further argument. He nodded at Phoebe. “I apologize for my niece’s

atrocious manners. If you'd like, I can cancel the party right now. At least then she might learn something from the punishment, and spend Christmas alone in her chamber."

A few protests rumbled through the room. Emily sucked in a breath, her eyes wide, the perfect picture of contrite young womanhood.

Phoebe bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling. "That won't be necessary. I'm sure Miss Bertrand simply misspoke."

"I'm certain that's exactly what it was." His grin triggered flutters in her belly. "A parlor game is a capital idea. Which one?"

Emily slid her gaze between Phoebe and her uncle and then she bounded off the settee. "How about Snap Dragon?" Her eyes twinkled. No trace of her earlier animosity remained. Such was youth.

Cecil shook his head. "Absolutely not. I won't have children sticking their fingers in flaming brandy for the sake of collecting raisins. How about Pass the Slipper? That's tame enough, having to locate a missing slipper."

"Uncle Cecil, that's a child's game, and we are most decidedly *not* children, despite what you think." Emily planted her hands on her hips. "Why not I Love My Love with an A?"

Dear heavens, that game was long and drawn out. Phoebe shook her head. "Oh, I don't know if we have time for that one, and besides, wouldn't that make you feel too much like being back at school? I mean, forced to invent statements that start with the same letter, all the way through the alphabet?" She was fairly certain indulging in that game would cause her headache to grow by leaps and bounds, and she didn't wish to keep track of all the letters and players. After all, it was her holiday too.

One of the boys cleared his throat. "I don't care which game we play as long as there are snacks. I'm starving."

Cecil frowned. "As I told Emily upon throwing this party, foodstuffs are reserved for meals only as the markets are having trouble keeping such things stocked, and staples are a much sought after commodity. You'll have to wait for luncheon."

"Actually," Phoebe cleared her throat. "Cook informed me this morning she was making spice cakes for Emily's guests. She said the sacrifice was worth seeing her girl smile."

Emily *did* smile then. "How lovely! What now, Uncle? Move All? How incredibly boring to hide a chair and have everyone rush around to fill the rest." Her frown deepened and her gaze found Phoebe. "I would really like your opinion." Pleading swam in her hazel eyes.

Of course. The young only made a concession when they were out of ideas, but she accepted the unspoken apology. Phoebe tamped the urge to make a sarcastic comment, and said instead, "Why not a few

rounds of Blind Man's Bluff? Your uncle and I will make certain none of you attempt to get away with anything scandalous." Although, the game itself had every chance for a legitimate caress since the blindfolded individual had to determine the identity of another player who would sit in a chair before them, only using hands and fingers, of course.

Cecil chuckled. "Intriguing idea, but only if Miss Pennyroyal takes a turn under the blindfold." His eyes held a decidedly wicked sparkle that once more sent tiny fires into her blood.

"Splendid!" Emily clapped her hands. "Uncle Cecil, you can be the first victim!" She glanced at her friends. "It's only right that we use the adults first." Her friends rapidly agreed.

"Very well." He made a great show of pretending he was put out. "I'll sacrifice myself for the sake of this party. Emily, locate Banks and have him fetch you one of my cravats. We'll use that as a blindfold."

Oh, bother. Phoebe rose as Emily ran out of the room. *What is he about and why does he have such a devilish gleam in his eye?* "All of you move the larger pieces of furniture to the walls then place one of the wingback chairs in the center of the rug. We'll gather 'round it."

Once Emily returned, she handed the cravat to Phoebe. "Will you put this on him? You're the most just and fair of us all. I know you won't cheat or let him cheat."

"Very well." She approached Cecil with the length of soft cotton in her hand. "Either sit down or kneel so I can put this on you."

"Ah, so that's how you get men to follow your dictates. You ask them to kneel and they do so without argument, like knights of old. That is quite a powerful skill." Yet he did as instructed, facing away from her.

"Pish posh. You know very well I do not wield such power." Phoebe smiled as she fit the length of cloth over his eyes and upper portion of his face then tied it securely at the back of his head, careful not to catch his hair in the knot. "Can you see, and please do not lie."

"I promise, I cannot see."

To be certain, she moved around to face him, holding up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Cecil shrugged. "Two?"

"No. Three. I'm convinced." She grabbed one of his hands, ignoring the comforting heat of his skin and the answering warmth that circled through her insides. "Up you go. The rest are ready to begin the game." She guided him to the waiting young people. When he didn't release her hand, she pulled from his grip. "All right, pick someone to sit in the chair, but do it quietly so he doesn't know."

"You could talk to me as a distraction," he offered in a whisper designed for her ears alone.

“Too much cheek, Mr. Tame,” she whispered back.

Emily gestured for Phoebe then pointed to the chair. Phoebe shook her head. The last thing she wanted was for Cecil to touch her in front of an audience and perhaps prompt an embarrassing reaction on her part, but when Emily and her girlfriends nodded and also pointed to the chair, Phoebe stifled a sigh. She sat where indicated and attempted to steel herself for what would come.

Dear Lord, please don't let me blush excessively in front of them or act unbecoming.

“We're ready, Uncle Cecil. See if you can guess who is sitting.” Emily tugged him to stand in front of the chair. “Remember, only your hands and fingers. I suppose if you get naughty, Miss Pennyroyal will smack your hand.”

A host of titters went through the girls present. The boys' expressions betrayed their wish that it was them in his place.

Cecil knelt in front of her. Phoebe shifted her legs to one side, keeping her legs tightly together. Even still, the second he laid a hand on one of her knees, she sucked in a silent breath. Warm tingles skittered over her skin. “My apologies for such familiarity.” He lifted his hand in an instant then resettled it near her face. One slender finger tapped the end of her nose, almost as if he wanted it for a marker, then, as soft and tender as a butterfly's wing, he brushed his fingertips along her cheek.

Dear heavens. Phoebe's pulse raced as he continued to explore the contours of her face. When he added a second hand, which meant four more fingers sliding soft and gentle over her cheeks, her chin, her eyebrows, she trembled and couldn't stop. He leaned closer, trapping her legs between his chest and the edge of the chair. She sucked in a shuddering breath. Her eyelashes fluttered. Tremors teased her core. Oh how she wished she could return the caress, but she couldn't or else forfeit the game.

This was a singularly bad idea. I won't let Emily or her friends take part in something so scandalous. But, oh, how wonderful the experience was.

Gooseflesh popped up on her skin while Cecil continued his simple, sensual caress. Tingles circled through her body, bringing up her temperature. She closed her eyes simply to better enjoy his touch, but that was a mistake, for she imagined his hands elsewhere on her body. Her nipples tightened. Thank goodness for the shawl that hid that traitorous reaction. Again, she held her breath, for with one hand he fingered the edge of her shawl.

“How interesting a subject,” Cecil murmured. He seemed to know how he affected her for he smoothed his thumbs along her eyebrows as he fanned his fingers into her hair, slightly tugging tendrils

from its bun.

Her cheeks warmed, and she hoped no one would notice. A few titters from the girls added tension to the proceedings. One of the boys commented that she must soon slap their host. How must she look giving Cecil so much liberty? She clamped her lips together to prevent any sort of sound from slipping out and betraying her identity or a clue of how nice she found his explorations. *Why can we not be alone in this moment?*

Finally, he slid his hands down the sides of her neck then rested them on her shoulders. The heat left behind burned her like a brand. "I believe I know who the subject is," Cecil announced. He sat back on his heels with a grin full of charm and cheek. "It can only be Miss Pennyroyal." He tugged off the blindfold and immediately held her gaze. "I knew it. There is only one woman who wears a tight bun like that all the time as well as a shawl."

Phoebe's belly quivered as she stared at him. That smile of his did scandalous things to her insides. Yes indeed, this game had been a singularly bad idea, but she wouldn't have traded her experience for the world. "Beginner's luck."

"Yes, well, I do recall playing Blind Man's Bluff when I was Emily's age and a bit beyond." He rose into a standing position and brought her up with him. "Who's next?" He handed off the blindfold to one of the boys, who would no doubt take his clues from Cecil's performance.

"We'll be in the drink now if you've given the young men ideas," she murmured.

"They shall be fine. After all, they're green lads yet without skill or finesse." He drew her a bit away from the crowd, leaned close then whispered, "I knew it was you. You have the softest skin. Would that I was given leave to caress more of it."

She gaped at him. "Such talk, and in this setting," she hissed in warning.

He continued on as if she'd never spoken. "I would recognize your scent of roses anywhere. And your tiny intake of breath when I touch you is unmistakable."

She forced a swallow into her dry throat. "You are very much a rogue when you should be providing them with a better example." Yet pleasure snaked through her that he knew her so well.

Cecil chuckled. "Always so proper, Phoebe. I wouldn't have it any other way." He released her hand then joined the rest of the party.

Two hours later, after everyone had taken a turn at the game and once they'd been served a luncheon of hearty potato soup and cold cuts and Cook's promised cakes, everyone retired to the parlor for quiet conversation or reading.

Except, the natives were getting restless now that the food in their

bellies had started to digest and the games of the morning were long past. Whines of “What to do now?” or “It’s *still* raining?” echoed through the group.

“If it were a fine day, we could have walked about,” one of the girls said with a whine very much like Emily’s.

“Oh, not this again,” Phoebe groused. She was not in a mood to pass the next few hours in complaints. “If Mr. Tame is of a mind, I shall lead the girls in a party into the business district for last minute Christmas shopping. Will taking keep you sufficiently occupied and less bored?”

“Yes!” Emily sprang up and embraced her in an impromptu hug. “You’re the best, Miss Pennyroyal.”

Chapter 8

Two hours after midnight, early Christmas Day

Cecil padded down the staircase in his bare feet. The hem of his shirt fluttered with his movements, for he hastily donned it and a pair of breeches. In his hand, he clutched two small gifts—presents for Emily and Phoebe—gleaned from his travels and procured from a chest in his room.

Shadows played tag along the walls. The skies, still overcast, prevented moonlight from filtering in through the windows, but the eerie silence remained, almost as if the house were holding its breath.

For what? Anticipation had propelled him out of bed and into motion while the household remained in slumber. As he tiptoed past his brothers' rooms—now the place where Emily's young men friends resided—he cocked his head and listened. No sound came from within and he breathed a sigh of relief. That meant he was the only male prowling about when he should know better. The same silence greeted him as he passed his niece's room as well as Phoebe's, where two of the other girls were staying.

Disappointment slid cold fingers along his spine. Would that he could pass these quiet hours with the headmistress he couldn't put from his mind. His fingers still tingled from his good-natured caresses during the game earlier the day before. If he'd had the opportunity, would he have pressed his advantage had they'd been alone?

A wolfish grin parted his lips. Absolutely. Desire had sprung between them, and undeniably so, but there were also the more genteel and abiding feelings underlying that heat. He'd do himself and her a disservice if he didn't explore what that could mean.

Yet some sixth sense, a nagging need, had brought him out of dreams. He couldn't lay a finger on the cause. Every instinct he had said the headmistress had pulled him from his bed with the force of

her thoughts. Did she remember his off-hand comment about an assignation on Christmas? His groin stirred to life.

Since he was now awake, it was as good a time as any to put his gifts beneath the evergreen tree Phoebe had insisted upon erecting in the back parlor when they'd returned from their shopping excursion yesterday. She'd taught them of the German custom as she and the girls had bedecked the dark green branches with ribbons and other shiny ornamentations they'd brought from their own rooms on a whim.

Phoebe. His heart skipped a beat as he reached the floor below and headed toward the parlor reserved for family use. What was he to do about the woman he couldn't forget, the woman who'd managed to turn his world upside down in but a handful of days?

The door rested halfway open, and when he crept silently into the room, shadows shifted and the faint scent of roses met his nose. She was here.

His heartbeat accelerated. Awareness of her prickled over his body. As quiet as he could, he clicked the door shut behind him and turned the key in the lock. It was a heaven-sent opportunity that left them both alone and on such a sacred night.

"Happy Christmas, Phoebe," he whispered into the darkness, hoping he wouldn't startle her.

A tiny gasp escaped her and she whirled around to face him, her back to the evergreen resting on a table, one hand clutched to her heart. The blonde waterfall of her hair cascaded about her shoulders and down her back, every inch the wonder he'd thought it would be. "Cecil." She took a shuddering breath. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask the same of you," he countered as he raked his gaze over her person. How dear she was clad in a modest night rail of ivory lawn. The tips of her toes peeked out beneath the hem that had been embroidered with flowers. Such a frivolity that didn't match her nonsense persona. "What has brought you here in the dead of night, Christmas though it may be?"

"I..." She fluttered a hand about her. "I..." She gestured at the tree behind her. "I had a couple of presents I wanted to place here so Emily would have a surprise when she awoke." The headmistress stood aside to show him the wrapped parcels. "Nothing extravagant, of course. Merely a set of kid gloves and a shawl, for it does persist in being chilly this time of year. Both practical things a young lady can use."

"And you are nothing if not practical, are you?" He reached around her. "I am doing the same." When he straightened, his arm brushed hers. "Where is your own shawl this night?" Praise God that article of clothing was missing, for that meant only one layer of fabric

separate him from her delectable curves.

"I left it upstairs. This was to be a quick jaunt." She wetted her bottom lip with her tongue and he followed the nervous movement as need to taste her built low in his belly. "There is also a gift for you," she said in a rush and retreated from him a few steps.

"Oh?" He deposited his own gifts—a fan with mother-of-pearl spines for Emily and a golden brooch for Phoebe—beneath the tree.

"Yes." She nodded, her eyes big and luminous in the dim light. No candles had been lit. The fire in the grate had long since died. "It is a small token of my gratitude to you for inviting me for the holidays." The sound of her heavy swallow echoed in the stillness. "A pewter stickpin, for your cravats, in the shape of a gull. So you'll remember our walk on the shore."

"As if I'll forget." He prowled after her, one of his steps eating up two of hers until he'd trapped her against the wall between a long-case clock on one side and a curio cabinet on the other. "I thank you for the gift, but I don't want your gratitude."

"What is it that you do want?" The breathless quality to the question made him smile.

Cecil moved forward, further pinning her in place with a palm planted on the wall at either side of her head. She rested a hand on his chest. The heat of her body seeped into his. "I want you, Phoebe. Body, heart and soul, but if you cannot give me everything, I will settle for whatever it is you agree to, for you've captivated me this holiday." He ducked his head and brushed his lips over hers in the veriest of caresses.

A tiny sigh escaped her and whispered over his lips. She fisted the hand that rested on his chest in his shirt. "Should I be honest with myself or remain logical?"

"Honestly is always valued over all things." He plucked at the tie holding the bodice of her night wear closed. "However, I am a gentleman, and if you say no to anything this night may bring, I will respect your wishes." The tie fell away and the bodice gaped open revealing the tops of her pale breasts.

She captured his face between her hands and held his gaze. Sincerity shone from those lovely blue depths and darkened into something that had his breath stalling. "I want you, Cecil Tame. For the first time in my life, I want to do something strictly for the moment, the pure joy of the doing. Something for me and no one else."

If it weren't the middle of the night and there weren't young people sleeping abovestairs, he would have shouted his victory. As it was, he simply stared at her as he slid his hands to her waist. "You are certain? After all, this is the height of scandalous and if word gets out,

your credibility at your school could be threatened.” He’d rather die than cause her hardship.

She dropped a kiss upon his chin and wound her hands behind his neck. Her breasts pressed against his chest, the hardened tips evident through their thin garments. “Let me worry about things that haven’t yet happened.” She landed another kiss to the underside of his jaw where she licked at a spot that proved to be especially sensitive for him. “After all, I am a widow and I’m long past an age of ruination.”

“Oh darling. Never ruined, only worshipped,” he said in a low voice before properly claiming her lips in a kiss he felt into the depths of his soul.

He moved his mouth over hers with the intent of exploring every part of her. Each nibble and nip she matched, and together they drank from each other, again and again until the sound of their labored breathing filled the room. “How can you not believe you are beautiful?” He caressed his hands down her sides and over her hips then moved them upward and cupped her generous breasts.

“Perhaps it is but a matter of perspective.” A moan obscured the words as he rubbed the pads of his thumbs over her nipples. Those tips hardened further from his ministrations.

“Perhaps you need to be told and often until you see what I see.” Cecil bent his head and took one of the turgid tips into his mouth. He teased the bud with tongue and teeth despite the fabric that covered it.

“Mmm.” If she were a cat, that sound would have been a purr. Phoebe shivered in his hold. “I’d forgotten the sensations...” She slipped her hands beneath his loose shirt and the heated touch of her palms on his skin seared him and brought his whole body primed with anticipation. “I knew you would feel manly and strong. I’m pleased you’ve met my expectations.”

The praise amused but also humbled him. He smiled and switched his attention to her other breast. Obviously, he wasn’t doing a masterful effort if she still could form words.

“Don’t think. Just enjoy... ack!” It was his turn to be caught off balance. His head strong teacher lifted the hem of his shirt and bent. She peppered his abdomen with hot kisses and his cock swelled almost painfully, but when she nipped at his skin and reached for his breeches, he captured her hands in his. “Damnation, woman. Leave off else this will end prematurely.”

Phoebe peered up at him from beneath her lashes. The wicked gleam in her eye sent pinpricks of need straight through his groin. “Then logic would dictate you proceed with haste.”

“Now who is possessed with too much cheek?” God, he adored her boldness. He released her hands only to fist his in the voluminous

folds of her night attire. "I've wanted to feel your skin since I met you in the school." Up, up, up he drew the fabric, revealing the long, shapely legs he'd dreamed about. "Exquisite."

Before she could protest, he dropped to his knees before her.

"Cecil, what are you—"

Holding the fabric out of his way with one hand, he encouraged her to part her legs and hook one knee over his shoulder. He groaned with reverence when the folds of her womanhood opened. "So beautiful." He touched his lips to her mound and chuckled when she jerked with a gasp. "Steady, my dearest Phoebe. Let me love you." And he would, with everything that he was, for it went beyond reason, this connection they shared.

"But you don't, we're not... Oooh." She ended her protest on the heels of a whimper.

The trembles moving through her limbs transferred to him as he tempted the swollen bundle of nerves out of hiding with his fingers and applied his tongue to the flesh. Over and over he circled his tongue around that all-important button until Phoebe's soft, keening cries of near-completion penetrated the haze surrounding his brain. His proper, logical headmistress was seconds away from shattering from his touch.

"Remember to keep your vocal responses to a minimum. We certainly don't want a horde of wide-eyed young people descending on our depravity." And Emily didn't need to know what he felt for her headmistress. Despite those thoughts, Cecil grinned against Phoebe's wet folds. He blew on the skin he'd just tormented and when she clutched at his head and pulled him closer with a soft plea, he indulged her all the more. He suckled her nubbin, drew his tongue over it, flicked it as fast as he could.

And then, Phoebe Pennyroyal came apart before him.

Even though she bit her bottom lip, the sounds of release she made from deep in her throat enveloped him and sent him hurtling closer to his own edge. Her body rocked. Her legs trembled. Arousal further slickened the folds he continued to lick, and when her leg slid from his shoulder and he feared she'd slump to the floor, Cecil quickly shoved to his feet and caught her in his arms.

Her eyelids fluttered and when as she looked at him, his cock hardened. "How fascinating," she murmured. "I certainly was never treated to that while married."

"Did I not tell you that sometimes age is the better part of endurance?" He kissed her and pressed her backward until the wall halted their progress.

Phoebe pulled away slightly. She licked her lips. "It would seem I still have much to learn, and that you are quite a teacher." When she

reached for the buttons on his breeches, he didn't protest. One by one they fell open and his length sprang into her palm. "Perhaps I should return the favor?" The brush of her fingers over his engorged member became the beginning of his undoing.

"Later." At her endearing pout, he placed a kiss on her forehead. "When I find release, I'll damn well do it inside you, my dear, for you've beguiled me from the first." So saying, he encouraged one of her legs around his hip. She hooked it about his waist and pulled him closer. His tip rubbed through her wetness and sat at her center. He stared into her eyes. "You are sure?" There was still an opportunity for her to change her mind even though he was near to exploding.

"Quite." Phoebe clutched his shoulders. She wriggled her hips and his tip slid inside her honeyed warmth. No going back. "Don't tell me you'll beg off now." One of her blonde eyebrows arched. "For all your worldly travels and acts of daring, will you allow a bold headmistress to intimidate you?"

"I think you know the answer to that," he whispered, and with a muted cry of triumph, he flexed his hips and seated himself fully into her sheath. She was his equal in all the ways that mattered.

"Oh, Cecil," she breathed. Her eyes drifted closed and she dug her fingernails into his shoulders. "That's lovely." The last word ended on a squeak as he pulled out.

Only to thrust back into her heat. It was indeed.

Never had he taken a woman against a wall and in his own parlor on Christmas morning, no less. But with Phoebe, every aspect of their joining felt right.

They moved together, their bodies honed and in tandem completing a rhythm that some couples took years to perfect. He quickened his strokes, pleasuring her again and again, faster, harder, deeper. His heartbeat pounded. Sweat coated his back and brow. He slipped his hands beneath her thighs and raised her off the ground, higher still until the whole of his weight supported her as he continued thrusting into her.

And then, the act shifted as he stared into her sky blue eyes. He imagined he saw his future in those cool depths; a future he wanted above all other things—a future where she was his and not his niece's companion. They shared a glance, a fleeting look and she smiled. That brief curve of full lips that sent his heart skipping and his mind spinning, and then she stiffened, whimpered and her inner walls contracted around his cock.

"Ah, oh, Cecil!"

He crashed his mouth onto hers and took her cry of release into himself. As she shook in his hold, he pushed inside her one last time and he exploded, his seed spilling with each jerk and pulse of his

member. His arms strained from holding her, but he couldn't let her go, not when she'd gone pliant in his embrace and had her arms draped over his shoulders, her labored breathing harsh in his ear.

"Damnation, but you are incredible," he said when he could form words again. He laid his forehead against hers. "My apologies for not being able to control my impulses and debasing both myself and you in such a manner. I had wanted to charm you and finesse you..."

Would she assume the act had meant nothing to him for the unorthodox location or the speed in which they'd consented to it?

"You poor thing." Phoebe wriggled and he assisted her into a standing position. She palmed his cheek, but the sated expression she wore convinced him more than anything she'd say. "I was not a virgin and neither did I want any of that. Believe me when I tell you, I wouldn't have you any other way."

Those specific words warmed his heart. Cecil claimed her lips again, this time in a tender kiss he hoped conveyed what he could not speak aloud. When he allowed them both breath, he said, "Happy Christmas, Phoebe."

She emitted an unladylike snort before she kissed him back. "I'd say this is the best Christmas I've spent in some time." She patted his cheek. Her smile could rival the power of the North Star. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He pulled away and grinned when she faltered in her steps while righting her night dress. "What now?" Quickly, he tucked his flaccid member into his breeches and did up the buttons.

"Now?" She shoved a lock of hair from her face. "I am going abovestairs to return to my bed." The glance she landed on him brimmed with banked heat. "Alone, for we do still have a responsibility toward those children."

The thought of parting from her, even for a handful of hours, seemed like an eternity that he couldn't bear. "I suppose you are correct." He moved toward the door and once he'd turned the key and rested a hand on the latch, he looked at her form over his shoulder. "You've given me a most remarkable gift."

Her soft, throaty laughter in his ear as she joined him sent gooseflesh sailing over his skin and renewed interest in his prick. "What, the stick pin?"

"No. You." And because he feared he wouldn't see the same devotion in her eyes as he felt for her, he fled the parlor like the coward he suspected he was, for what sort of man had relations with a woman in his employ without securing a future for her?

Chapter 9

Christmas afternoon

P hoebe hummed one of her favorite carols as she put another seed cake onto her saucer next to her teacup.

The young people were quietly talking in groups around the drawing room while she and Cecil remained on a pair of settees with the detritus from the brief repast around them on chairs and low tables.

“Careful, Miss Pennyroyal, else you’ll lose your stern veneer in front of those girls,” he said in a low voice as he stirred milk into his second cup of tea.

She gave into a grin as she glanced at him, primly balancing her saucer on her knee as she took a sip of her own beverage. “At the moment, I rather think I don’t care. I am happy.”

“Ah, due to this being the day of Christ’s birth.” He sent a glance across the room. “And Emily and her friends are, at present, operating at low volume.”

“No.” She gazed at him from over the rim of her cup. “Because of you, and what we did... earlier.”

By rights she should be outraged or at the least scandalized. Didn’t the core of what they taught at her finishing school preach against this very scenario? Yet she felt neither of those things. Overwhelmingly, the emotion that rolled through her the most was happiness, the kind of pure feeling a person knew when life was truly amazing.

She refused to feel shame or regret over what she’d shared with him. Being a widow afforded her many things, and she knew her own mind. She’d wanted to share love making with this man, and if she had the choice, she would have done the same thing over again.

He cleared his throat. “Now that you’ve had time to process it, you are not furious with me for taking advantage?”

“Such gammon you speak, Mr. Tame.” Phoebe laughed. She laid her cup and saucer on the low table before her. “If I remember correctly, you didn’t take advantage when I fully gave you permission.” She winked. “I know my own mind.”

“That you do.”

No more was said, for a whine went through the assembled young people that spoke of their growing boredom once more.

“It would appear are halcyon respite is about to be shattered,” she murmured as the young people stood and approached them.

“It is still raining,” Emily announced with a frown to the window.

As if that is my fault. Phoebe lifted an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon, but I seemed to have misplaced my fairy wand and thusly cannot change the weather simply because you wish it.”

Across from her, Cecil choked on a swallow of tea.

The company largely ignored him. Emily flounced onto the settee next to him. “What shall we do? It is Christmas and we want some sort of entertainment.”

“Can you not be inventive and use what is available to you?” Cecil asked once he’d recovered.

“Oh, Uncle, you are no help,” Emily complained.

A couple of the boys held a whispered conference.

“I have a capital idea,” one of the young men interjected into dreary atmosphere of the parlor.

“What?” Emily sprang to her feet, her expression once more hopeful.

“Let’s grab a mattress from one of the beds. We can use it to ride down the staircase, like my brother and I did with sleds on the snow back home. Whoever manages to stay on for the whole trip wins.”

“Wins what?” one of the other girls asked.

The boy shrugged then he grinned. “A trip under the mistletoe.” He gestured at the small bunch of greenery hanging from the doorframe.

Cecil groaned. “Within reason and monitored the whole time.”

“May we, Miss Pennyroyal?” Emily threw a plaintive glance her way.

Phoebe looked across the room at Cecil. “Was this your doing?” She had no problem imagining him at the boys’ age and going for domestic adventure such as that. “It sounds like something you’d do as a child.”

He held up his hands and shook his head. “I promise I had nothing to do with it. Their young minds came up with all on their own, though, if I was many years younger, it would be just the thing to pass the time.”

Not wanting the guests to put themselves into unnecessary danger

but not willing to listen to another couple of hours filled with complaints, Phoebe nodded her permission at Emily. "Go ahead, though I believe I'll sit this one out. It is one game I do not care to partake of."

"That's all right, Miss Pennyroyal. We cannot all be bold and daring." Emily ran from the parlor, quickly followed by the rest of her guests.

"If only she knew how bold I can be." Phoebe rolled her eyes as she stood.

"I wonder what she'd say if she knew what we did last night?"

"Let us pray she never suspects." She gave into a smile even as heat slapped her cheeks. "Does it reflect badly on me that merely thinking about such an undertaking as they'll do just makes me tired?"

"Not at all. No doubt you're fatigued by your exertions of the morning." He snorted when she threw a speaking glance at him. "It could also mean you have enough common sense not to throw yourself down the stairs on a bed mattress."

"Of course, because there are better uses for mattress than that, don't you think?" How fun it was to banter like this.

"Now that's the mind I've come to respect." He grinned while he offered her his arm. "Shall we go watch the spectacle under the guise of monitoring the situation?"

Common sense indeed. If she had any, she'd try everything she could think of to find a permanent replacement for the chaperone position because being near Cecil in any capacity was proving to be quite the challenge, especially after they'd come together erotically that morning. The longer she lingered, the more her heart would be caught. Yet, the silliness and desire that had swamped her since meeting him wouldn't abate, and she wanted all the time in his company she could get. "Who knows, it might prove to be very entertaining." And it would help occupy her thoughts. She looped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her out of the room.

Bloody hell. Just touching him in a commonplace way sent flutters tumbling into her lower belly.

Shortly afterward, Emily and her friends gathered around the bottom of the staircase while the boy who suggested the lark stood at the first landing with Banks. The ginger-haired lad chose to stretch out on his belly on the mattress. When he yelled to begin, Banks pushed the mattress. The boy sailed down the stairs before the mattress went cockeyed, resulting in the boy falling off and tumbling down the rest of the stairs *sans* conveyance.

"Good heavens, someone is going to break their necks." Phoebe started toward the stairs, but the lad sprang to his feet with the biggest grin she'd ever seen.

“That was the greatest fun! Who’s next?”

While Emily raised her hand and bounced up and down, Cecil led Phoebe to the opposite side of the foyer. “We may as well make ourselves comfortable. It looks like this activity will occupy them for the conceivable future and that is infinitely better than watching them mope.”

She couldn’t abandon her responsibility. “What if one of them splits their head open, or breaks an arm, or the girls can go tip over tail. What if their skirts hitch up, or—”

Cecil laid a finger over her lips, despite the fact they could be seen. “Phoebe?”

“Yes?” Tiny fires erupted throughout her blood and added confusion to the desire the heightened her awareness of him.

He withdrew his hand. “Don’t overthink it. This is just good, harmless fun because we cannot very well throw these children outside into the rain.” He sat on the marble floor with his back to the wall and his long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. Ten feet away, Emily came to a halt, still on the mattress. The girls squealed and the boys let out a round of cheers. Her eyes sparkled and high color stained her cheeks. “Look at her. She’s enjoying herself and not worrying for the moment. I’d say this plan is a rousing success.”

“Perhaps.” Still, she frowned as one of the boys lugged the mattress back to the landing. Banks helped situate him onto it then gave him a push. Was that a smile breaking through the man’s crusty exterior?

“You worry too much.” Cecil gave a section of her skirts a light tug. “Come sit with me. Isn’t that what proper older folks do?”

“We are the farthest thing from proper,” she said in a barely there whisper. Phoebe looked down at him then caught her breath at the mischief lurking in his gaze, but when he gave her that smile he reserved only for her—the one full of cheek and charm—her heart trembled. Already, she’d lingered here too long, for she’d somehow managed to fall for him. *Stupid, Phoebe. He’ll leave Brighton when he grows weary of this life and then where will you be?* “Very well.” She sank onto the floor beside him. The cold from the marble seeped through her skirts, but her side close to Cecil burned so she didn’t notice the chill overly much.

“Do you particularly need that shawl around your shoulders?” His tone suggested he didn’t care either way.

“Well, it is keeping me warm. Why?”

He shrugged. “I was thinking of using it to put over both our laps since it is rather chilly with the front door so close.” He captured her gaze. “Don’t you think?”

Her cheeks burned. What was he about now? "I suppose."

"You shouldn't cover your charms with that garment anyway," he continued in a low voice. "I must prefer seeing the curve of your breasts and imagining."

"Do stop." Her nipples tightened as if they agreed with his line of thought. She unknotted the shawl then slid it off her shoulders and handed it to him. "You're more than welcome to it though I doubt it will provide much protection." Truly, the man had lost his mind. "And it won't flatter you."

"Oh, I think it will be just fine for this purpose." With a flourish, Cecil spread the shawl over their laps. Of course, it didn't quite cover them both all the way. Then, in the space between them that remained covered by the garment, he brushed her hand with his.

Tingles shot up her arm. Had he meant to do that? When she edged her hand away, he chased it, finally grabbing it and twining her fingers with his. "Mr. Tame, what are you doing?" Flutters filled her belly even as the heat from his hand transferred to hers. Answering tremors moved through her core, and she shifted in place. How could this one man make her feel so many things in such a short period of time?

"Hush, Miss Pennyroyal. Don't you feel warmer already?" He stared straight ahead as if he were intently watching the antics of the young people instead of causing her all kinds of unsettling and exciting feelings.

She swept her gaze along his strong jaw, over his ear, down his shoulder then finally to the shawl that hid their joined hands. "I believe I do. Thank you."

"Too bad this is merely a shawl and a lacy one at that."

"Why?"

"If it were a quilt, I'd have more space available and I would do more with this hand than just hold yours." He squeezed her fingers.

"Oh?" Was there no end to his scandalous suggestions? Curiosity got the better of her as Emily took another trip down the stairs. "What would you do?"

He leaned closer to her. "Caress your hip, your leg, perhaps take a liberty and explore between your sweet thighs and find out if you're still as wet for me now as you were this morning."

"Do hush!" How bold he was, how brash. She turned her head and caught his grin in profile. How dear. It would be horrible when she had no choice but return to the school once the holiday break was over.

"Well?" He continued to watch the young people's antics.

"Well what?" She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing she knew what he referred to.

“Are you?” He squeezed her fingers again.

She huffed in pretend exasperation. “Yes.”

“Better and better.” He said nothing else. Neither did she. There was no need.

A smile curved her lips as she watched one of Emily’s girlfriends take her turn down the stairs. Sitting here next to Cecil with their hands entwined and talking of scandalous things made her feel more content than she had in a long time.

If only it could last.

Chapter 10

Two days after Christmas

Cecil glanced around the dining room as the company finished eating dinner. Cook had made delectable roasted chicken with potatoes done in the chicken's juices. The diners had enjoyed the simple meal anyway. Of late, he'd looked forward to sitting down to the evening meal with the two women in his life and couldn't imagine a time he'd lived without either of them at his table.

The knowledge that he was a very lucky man pressed upon him daily as did the cloying panic that once the holiday ended and Emily returned to the finishing school, so too would Phoebe be removed from his life.

It is untenable.

Yesterday, after the mattress game had died down, the party members had gone their separate ways for quiet time while he and Phoebe had returned to the very parlor where they shared each other's bodies. They'd talked of the games they'd played in their childhoods of the places he'd visited in his travels, of her favorite pieces of literature, everything except the mutual desire that connected them. And then Banks had requested his help with a concern in the stable. Thanks to other problems that required his attention and yet another shopping excursion the females took, he hadn't see her since then.

And he'd missed her. Acutely. She'd been in his life for nearly a week. How was he expected to survive without her? *I will just have to make certain t doesn't come to that.*

Now, he couldn't wait to converse with Phoebe again, perhaps get her alone, meet her in the dead of night once more. His body called to her, craved her, and he wanted her in his life for much more than satisfying a base instinct. He adored listening to her voice. Each gentle inflection carried him away and made him long to experience her

companionship for much longer than her temporary term of companion would give him. Each roll of her eyes and the way she tilted her head when considering a request tugged at his heart. Cecil tucked away those thoughts. No use hungering for something that might not come to pass. They'd yet to discuss anything beyond the current day facing them. Besides, today was Emily's birthday, and he should concentrate his focus on her.

Devil take it. Have I neglected her since becoming enchanted with her headmistress?

If so, he'd failed them both. And he didn't wish to begin a life with either of them on bad terms.

He shoved that disconcerting thought away. Today was also special since Phoebe's son, Max, had joined them for the last few days of the house party. Cecil studied the boy. In that tall and gangly stage of youth, he was all limbs and angles. He possessed the same blond hair that his mother did and the same blue eyes, but the rest of his features must have belonged to his father. They sat side by side, with their heads together, talking occasionally with laughter punctuating the conversation before she gently encouraged him to banter with the others at the table.

His chest tightened. He knew, deep down, she was an excellent mother. She would be a wonderful wife. But now was not the time for such a discussion. Cecil tapped his wineglass with the edge of his knife. The chatter died down. "Since it's Emily's fifteenth birthday, I think it's time for some gifts. Unless we should wait until later?"

"No, no! Do it now!" Emily, in her exuberant fashion, wriggled in her chair. "If Miss Pennyroyal says it's all right and proper, we should be fine."

Every head at the table turned toward the headmistress. A faint stain of color brightened her cheeks. She briefly met his gaze and the heat in those blue depths had him shifting in his own chair. Finally, she nodded, and with a slight smile said, "I don't see why not."

Cecil's heart skipped a beat and he grinned. "Then, everyone, by all means, go fetch your gifts and return here. We'll commence shortly." Everyone left the room except for Max and Emily. Of course, since Max came to the house party late and didn't know Emily, he wouldn't have brought a gift. "Good evening. I'm Mr. Cecil Tame." He gestured to Emily. "This is my niece, Miss Emily Bertrand. I'm pleased you could make it for the remainder. I apologize there wasn't time for introductions before now."

Max gave a curt nod. "My mother mentioned you as the owner and host. Mr. Max Snell here." When he glanced at Emily, a blush started at his neck and worked steadily upward to encompass his cheeks and ears. "I met Miss Bertrand earlier upon my arrival."

Cecil bit back a smile. The boy sounded so serious as if he attempted to portray the image of an adult man. Was it wishing to do so in front of him or Emily? "Enjoy your stay. We are all still hoping the rain will turn to snow."

"I love being out in the water almost more than anything else, but seeing snow would be a real treat. It happens so rarely around here." For the first time, Max smiled. "I cannot bear my time away from Brighton."

"I know what you mean," Cecil rejoined as he warmed to his subject. "My travels have taken me around the world, and there is nowhere that is quite as cozy as this old town." He slid his gaze to Phoebe. "It does have its charms one cannot find elsewhere."

The party returned and prevented any more conversation, but he couldn't forget the blush upon Phoebe's cheeks. Soon after they settled into their seats, while the butler and the kitchen maids cleared away the dishes, Emily clapped her hands. "Who's first?"

"I'll go." Phoebe handed Emily a small, flat box. "It's not much, but a young lady can gain use from it."

"Thank you. I cannot believe you gave me a gift after the two Christmas presents." Emily lifted the lid from the box and exclaimed with apparent joy. "I adore them, Miss Pennyroyal." She held up a delicate, white handkerchief. Her initials were embroidered in blue thread in one corner. Four others rested folded in the box.

"I am glad. I did the handiwork myself." Genuine pleasure hung on her voice.

"Exquisite, Miss Pennyroyal." Cecil went next. "I trust this makes up for your birthday being rained upon." He retrieved a small, white velvet box from an interior jacket pocket then gave it to her. "I hope your fifteenth year is profound."

Gasps went around the girls present as Emily pulled out a delicate amethyst pendant on a thin, gold chain.

"Uncle Cecil, it's beautiful! You remembered when I admired it in the shop window almost a year ago." Emily bounded from her chair, ran around the table and threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, poppet." He hugged her. She squirmed away only to show the necklace to her friends. Cecil met Phoebe's gaze across the table. "Where she's concerned, I'm afraid my willpower has the strength of porridge."

A smile curved her kissable mouth. "I think in this case you are allowed the small indulgence."

Cecil nodded. He watched Emily open the rest of her gifts with a silly grin he couldn't contain. Yes, having Phoebe in his household had been a good idea. Along with the handkerchiefs and necklace, his

niece received a shawl of fine, pink silk, a few sets of hair ribbons and books. Laughing and joking proved to be the order of the hour while Cook brought out a cherry trifle with vanilla sponge cake, made specifically for the celebration.

Since the young people were gathered about Emily anyway, they each dug their spoons into the trifle bowl without making use of plates or the civilized custom of sitting down for dessert. When he shot a glance at Phoebe, she shrugged.

"It would take too much time to sort them out," she explained. Phoebe took up a spoon and dared to dip it into the trifle bowl. When she came away with an uneven spoonful, she merrily put it into her mouth, but was jostled by one of the girls at the last second. A smudge of cherry juice decorated her cheek. "Mmm. Delicious. My compliments to your cook."

"I'll be certain to convey them." He couldn't help staring at that spot of crimson. What would she do if he leaned over and kissed it from her skin? Would it taste tart or sweet? His heart pounded. If he kissed her now, he wasn't certain it would remain chaste. Yet, should he? Could he? He stared at her lips and stifled a groan when she licked them. But no, it simply wasn't done, especially not in front of company.

Fate decided for him. Emily leaned over and wiped away the smudge with her napkin. "You had a bit of a mess just there on your cheek."

Cecil let out a shuddering breath. Crisis averted. Except, his arousal grew and his member pressed tight against the front of his breeches. God, he wanted this woman.

One of the girls licked her spoon. "Miss Pennyroyal, will you sing for us?"

He sat up straighter. "You sing?" Now that was an interesting snippet, and one that added more intrigue to the woman who owned his heart.

"Oh yes," the girl went on. "She's vastly entertaining and accomplished. At assemblies, she plays the pianoforte and has performed for a few ambassadors and dignitaries in London."

Phoebe rolled her eyes. "My, my, all of that makes me sound more important than I really am." A blush stole into her cheeks and pleasure lined her expression. "Besides, it's Emily's birthday. I don't wish to take attention away from her."

Always so humble. Cecil stood. "I would love to hear you play."

Emily nodded. "Come on, Miss Pennyroyal. You have a wonderful voice. It's what I want for my birthday."

"I already gave you a gift." Phoebe looked around the table and her blush deepened. "Obviously, I won't come up the winner in this

argument, will I?"

Possessed of a swift and strong urge to hear her sing as well as play the pianoforte, Cecil came around the table, grabbed one of her hands and tugged her from her chair. "Come. The crowd has spoken, and since the young gentleman and I have never heard you perform, it's mandatory you rectify this so we all may have a new topic of discussion. Plus, it is still the Christmastide season. Plenty of music to choose from." Despite her softly murmured protests, he pulled her from the room, through the hall and into the drawing room. The house party followed, sounding very much like a herd of cows as their heels rang on the marble floors.

She harrumphed, but she positioned herself on the bench behind the instrument. "You're as bad as the children."

"That I am. Can I help it if I'm selfish and wish to be entertained?" He leaned close. "I find myself enchanted at the notion of listening to you sing. You continue to surprise and fascinate me."

"Pish posh." She waved a hand at him in dismissal. "Anyone can do it."

"True, but anyone isn't here. There is only you." *There will only always be you.* Quelling the urge to brush his fingers along the tempting curve of her cheek or linger his touch on the sensitive skin of her nape, Cecil left her side in order to take a seat amidst Emily and her friends, eventually settling beside Max. "Begin when you're ready, Miss Pennyroyal."

The first song she performed was a popular carol that put them all in mind of the night of Christ's birth. Her fingers flew over the keys, for she didn't play with sheet music. There was no vocal accompaniment with the piece, but there didn't need to be. Her skill with the keys, the way she closed her eyes as she performed, the gentle sway of her body as she lost herself in the music was entertainment enough.

Cecil sat enthralled as he remembered how she'd moved with him when they'd made love, the way the little sounds at the back of her throat had driven him wild. How anyone could remember a passage of music let alone a whole piece was beyond his ken, but she'd been born with the talent, and she brought the same enthusiasm into every aspect of her life.

Song after song followed. Some they sang with her, some she sang alone; some were merely there to showcase her skill on the keys. When she finished, a beautiful smile curved her mouth, and she seemed lit from within. Cecil led the applause, barely remaining seated when all he wanted to do was shoot from his chair and scoop her up in his arms, cover her face with kisses and tell her how wonderful she was.

But she took it all in stride with a simple smile.

“Jolly good show, Miss Pennyroyal,” Cecil said. “Thank you for indulging us.”

“Thank you.” Her smile widened. Then, she winked. “I think it’s appropriate, just this once and for a birthday celebration, if my last song is somewhat less than proper. This is a scandalous song folks like to sing in taverns called *The Turban’d Turk*.”

Was there no end to her surprises? Cecil gawked as the bouncy tune poured from the pianoforte and the equally giddy, if quite bawdy, verses tumbled from her mouth. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined a prim and proper headmistress even listening to such a scandalous song let alone sing it with such conviction that she included an Irish accent.

A blush infused her cheeks at a rather risqué stanza, but she kept on, much to the delighted laughter of the audience, and when she finished with a flourish of her fingers on the keys, Cecil lost the rest of his heart to her. She was so wonderfully talented and good-natured, he wished he had more time with her. They desperately needed another night alone, to talk of everything and nothing, so that he could discern if he had a future with her. And for the first time since he’d met her, he wasn’t certain. She was self-possessed and independent. She didn’t need him to live a happy and satisfying life.

Phoebe stood up from the bench. “Well, that’s all the entertainment you’ll get from me tonight. Perhaps someone else should play now.”

Many of the girls rushed to the instrument, not to play, but to ask her to repeat the words to the song she’d just performed.

Cecil glanced at Max. There was such an expression of pride on his face that his chest tightened. “You’re a lucky man to have Phoebe for a mother. I’ve never known anyone quite like her and find I’m impressed with every new thing I discover.”

“Yes, I am.” Max transferred his attention to Cecil. “She’s a very special person and important to me.” The young man frowned. “I’m protective of her ever since my father died. The last thing I want is for anyone to hurt her, especially if the person wishes only to pass the time with her in a dalliance that means nothing.” The boy raised a bushy blond eyebrow. “Do you understand?”

Cecil bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. The boy had issued him a veiled threat, as if he had any intention of abusing Phoebe’s trust. Still, he took the admonition in the spirit in which it was given. “Of course I understand. I would never hurt your mother. I have every respect for her.”

“Do you?” The look Max passed over him hinted that the boy knew exactly what Cecil had done to his mother. But that was impossible.

“Of course. She’s a wonderful person, but I must tell you, I do intend to know her much better, even go so far as to ask if I can call on her once a replacement companion can be procured for Emily.” He reeled beneath the implication. Was that true? He searched his mind but only came away with affection, desire and... love.

Absolutely, he meant what he’d said and would make arrangements with alacrity.

“I believe you.” Max nodded, and the gesture made him seem old beyond his years. “I’ve looked after Mother the best I know how since I became the man of the house.” He sat a little straighter as he stared Cecil in the face. “Though she might show everyone around her she’s highly capable, she’s lonely at times. I can see it in her eyes.”

“Is that right? She must miss your father very much.” *Something* tugged at Cecil’s heart, but he refused to ascertain what. Was that why she’d been careful not to let him close, show her feelings other than passion?

“I’m sure she does. No one can replace him in her affections.” Max narrowed his eyes. “Beyond that, I think Mother misses debating and talking of day to day things with a gentleman. When I’m away, I don’t like thinking she’s all alone with nothing to occupy her.”

This time Cecil couldn’t hide his grin. Obviously, the boy believed everyone’s world revolved around him. “Knowing your mother, I’m certain she has pursuits outside of you or the school.” What were they? Did she wish to use her skill at the pianoforte to entertain at concert halls? He made a mental note to determine what she enjoyed doing.

“Be that as it may, it makes me sad. I feel guilty pursuing my own dreams while Mother is so vulnerable. I hate to think of her as prey for unscrupulous men.” Max clenched a hand into a fist where it rested on his thigh. “I haven’t had to run off a gentleman yet, but I will if needed.”

“I’m glad she’s got someone watching over her. It sets my mind at ease.” Cecil cleared his throat. “What it is you wish to do when you’re through with school?” Perhaps if he made a friend of Max, Phoebe would be more inclined to accept a courtship.

“I’d like to be a solicitor, or perhaps if I can overcome my shyness for speaking in front of a group, a barrister. Law fascinates me.” A light appeared in the younger man’s eyes and animated his face.

Cecil nodded. “Very lofty goal. I’m proud of you for that.” He clapped a hand to Max’s shoulder. “Carry on with that determination, and I’m sure you’ll succeed.”

Before Max could reply, Phoebe joined them. “Is everything all right over here?” She glanced between Cecil and Max. Lines of stress appeared on either side of her mouth. “The two of you seemed quite

serious.”

“Everything is fine. I was just asking Max what occupation he had his heart set on.” Cecil stood. “And now I remember I’ve been lax in my duties as host. Max, since you’re a late arrival, please allow me to show you where you’ll pass the remainder of the house party. I trust you’ve brought luggage?”

When the boy mumbled something about it being in the parlor, he hopped from the settee then pelted from the room.

“Don’t be cross if he hasn’t warmed to you yet. It takes Max a bit to accept new people into his circle.” Phoebe smiled and her eyes danced. “Thank you for making an allowance for him while I’m here. His cousins had another engagement this week.”

“Think nothing of it. Happy to have him—and you—here.” He glanced around the room. The young people headed to the door. “Where are they going?”

Phoebe followed his gaze. “Some of the girls have expressed an interest in combing your library for reading material. The others are turning in early. They’re bored, you see, and I’m not about to let on that I have a couple of their confiscated novels hidden in my room.” A giggle followed the statement and wrapped around Cecil like a warm embrace.

“You’re full of surprises, my dear.” He wished to say so much more, do so much more, but when Max appeared in the doorway with a valise in hand, Cecil sighed. “As much as I would love to continue our conversation, as well as find out where your reading interests lie beyond a naughty novel or two, I promised Max a tour. If you’ll excuse me?”

She nodded. “If I don’t see you again tonight, have pleasant dreams.” A hint of disappointment lingered in her expression.

Bloody hell. Did she wish for an assignation then? He couldn’t very well ask while her son lingered nearby. “You do the same, Miss Pennyroyal.” He gave her a slight bow then joined Max in the hall.

There had to be a way to spend time with her regardless that his house was full of nosy young people. Otherwise, how else was he supposed to gauge her interest in a courtship from him?

Chapter 11

December 27th

Phoebe woke the next morning with a smile on her face and a curious lightness in her heart, and nary a reason for them both.

No, that wasn't true. She stared at the ceiling. Cecil was the reason. She'd performed that bawdy ditty last night to see what his reaction would be. For her, it had lost its shock value since she'd learned it years before she'd met her husband, and it always served as just the thing to close out a musical evening or a tense gathering. It didn't matter that it wasn't appropriate for a holiday. Yet when she'd glanced at Cecil's face, he wasn't shocked at all. In fact, he'd mostly seemed... beguiled.

Was it for the song or her singing?

It didn't matter. Knowing he'd enjoyed himself had been a gift enough. And oh, he had looked so handsome! He must have dressed with care since it had been Emily's birthday celebration. And the dear man hadn't seemed to mind the constant chatter of all Emily's friends. Not to mention he'd talked with Max as if he'd been an equal, really listened to the boy's hopes and dreams.

It had been a long time since she'd been swept away by such a man.

A light knock on the door yanked Phoebe from her musings. She sat up in bed then plumped the pillows behind her back. The two girls who'd shared her bedroom had risen earlier and had already tripped out, no doubt to search out their friends and formulate plans for the day. In her defense, she'd been more groggy than usual, but then, she'd had more stimulation on all fronts than she normally did.

"Come in." She rearranged the bedclothes across her lap before Emily quietly entered. The girl closed the door behind her.

"Good morning, Miss Pennyroyal." Emily tucked her hands behind

her back and rocked on the balls of her feet. "Are you busy?" A smile graced the girl's lips. In her white, linen night rail which was in much the same style as Phoebe's, she resembled a much younger child.

"Not at the moment, Miss Bertrand." She stifled a snort of amusement. As if she'd been entertaining a male caller in her bed. "Is there something on your mind?"

"Yes." She crossed the room then stood at the bedside. "Would you mind too terribly much if I came into bed with you for a moment?"

The question confused Phoebe. None of her students had ever wished to further a personal relationship with her. "I suppose not." When the girl regarded her with her big hazel eyes that reflected nothing except sincerity, Phoebe pulled back the bedclothes. "Hop in. Obviously, you have something to ask me."

"I do." Emily scampered into bed then snuggled into the bedclothes and against the pillows. "How does a person know they're in love?"

The novel experience of having a young lady share confidences warmed her. Though she loved Max to distraction, she'd always hoped she'd have another child—a girl—to dress in pretty, lace-edged clothes and encourage her hair to curl around her finger. Those were dreams of another time, and probably why she'd ended up in teaching. She was quite too advanced in years to hang onto that dream.

"Ah. I think I see what you're after." Phoebe chuckled. The poor girl fancied herself in love with one of the young men from her house party. Infatuated was probably more the thing. "Well, a lady's cheeks will heat with a blush, her heart will race while in the presence of said male. She wishes he would kiss her and hopes he doesn't by turns." Phoebe drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. "She doesn't want to leave his side, wants to know everything about him and wants to share her darkest secrets or greatest triumphs with him. She cannot wait to know him in the most intimate of ways." Heat swirled through her lower belly. Oh, how she wished she could further *that* relationship with Cecil.

"Anything else?" Emily's wide eyes were full of curiosity. "I'm very interested in this topic."

"Oh?" Phoebe's inquisitiveness grew. "Have you fallen for one of the young men in the house party?" *Please don't let her say Max.* Not that she wouldn't be thrilled to know Max had shown an interest in the opposite sex after being so shy around young people his own age; she just wasn't mentally prepared to have him chasing them.

"You know what they say about curiosity killing the cat, Miss Pennyroyal." She lowered her lashes and hid her eyes.

"Indeed." Phoebe relaxed slightly. Perhaps she had no designs after all. "The lady in love also wishes to know everything about her

potential beau. Just the sound of his voice affects her and leaves her warm all over. When his hand brushes hers, it's as if the heavens have opened." Phoebe's smile widened as she held Emily's gaze. "A woman begins to think beyond her current situation, and she allows herself to dream." An image of Cecil danced through her mind and brought a host of flutters into her belly. Did he have a favorite place he'd gone while traveling the world? Had he embarked upon a romance while away? Did a lady ever break his heart? Was there a particular food he enjoyed that he couldn't find on England's shores? "It's quite a glorious feeling, actually."

Unless the man had wanderlust in his blood, and from the tiny bit she'd gleaned about his family, all the Tames did. Never stayed long in one place. A lady certainly didn't want that sort of heartache in her life.

Then the reality of what she talked about set in. She blinked and looked away from Emily's bright eyes. Falling in love simply couldn't happen to a woman her age. It wasn't possible. Hadn't she already had her courtship and marriage? And outside that first proposal that Cecil had thrown out to merely talk with her, he hadn't asked again.

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. How silly of her to think in terms of a future. What they'd shared had been only physical. She had a son from her previous union, and her life was stable, fulfilling even. She was efficient at her post; it was secure enough that she could provide for herself and her son. Was it really wise to give into silly schoolgirl dreams of new love and romance?

Yet Cecil had all but hinted that he had a special interest in her as a woman. Did that mean he wished for a relationship? She refused to allow herself to think of such a thing for fear it wouldn't come to fruition. Hinting wasn't a declaration, and to hope for something along those lines after merely a week was the height of folly.

So was giving one's self to a man after a handful of days. Yet she had.

Phoebe cleared her throat and shoved the confusing, disconcerting thoughts from her mind. She glanced at Emily, who gave her a sweet smile. "I beg your pardon. Not only have I gone off wool-gathering, but I've monopolized our conversation. Is there something you wish to share?"

"Not right now." Emily slid from the bed. "I understand exactly what you're trying to say, Miss Pennyroyal. You've been quite helpful." Her girlish smile didn't dim. "Right now I have to meet my friends for breakfast. We need to plan our day. Will you go star gazing with the party tonight?"

"Star gazing?" Phoebe snorted even as her mind tripped to catch up to the abrupt change in conversation. "Won't there be more rain

tonight?"

"Uncle Cecil hinted last night before we retired that it might clear of clouds for a brief time. He said if we have a chance to look at the moon and there is a ring around it, that such a thing indicates snow in the offing." Emily's eyes twinkled. "Uncle said we could pair off on blankets if we kept the chatter to a dull roar today and there was no personal touching."

Poor Cecil. Though he'd generously offered his home to Emily and her friends, the noise level had him running for the safety and obscurity of his study more often than not. That was why she took the girls shopping, to give him a modicum of peace. He simply wasn't able to handle the trials and tribulations of the younger crowd, for he wasn't accustomed to them like she was. "If that truly is the case, we might as well take advantage of any break in the weather. Perhaps we can convince Cook to pack a light picnic for the event. I'll even concede to letting you and your friends walk the shore as long as you stay in sight of me or your uncle."

"It should prove to be a lovely time then." Emily waved from the doorway. "I shall talk to you later, and thank you!"

Once the girl closed the door behind her, Phoebe sighed. She didn't know that she'd imparted all that much information, but it had been a pleasant interlude just the same. She shook her head. *Stupid Phoebe.* Keeping such notions of love and romance when she should know better.

Romance once in her life had been enough.



By the time night descended, Phoebe fairly hummed with a mixture of excitement and nerves. Her stomach was knotted, and the little dinner she'd managed to eat threatened a return trip. Flutters tickled her insides while heated tingles rode up and down her spine. *Phoebe Snell, get hold of yourself. There is no reason for such fanciful reactions.* The group as a whole would assemble on the beach. She and Cecil would not be alone, and even if they were, there would be no repeat of what they'd shared in the parlor.

Yet as she descended the stairs, she caught sight of the rest of the party assembling in the foyer and again anticipation zipped through her veins.

This is madness. She should beg off from the star gazing party and

instead, lock herself into her room with a novel. The trouble with that was the situation and romantic tension woven into the tale couldn't match what Cecil made her feel. Not to mention, she'd given into the silly whim tonight and wore a thinner dress than she normally would—all in the event he might look her way in more than a contemporary capacity. Though it was made of navy wool and had three-quarter sleeves instead of full and a lower neckline than usual, it fed into the vain, feminine part of her need to look her best in his company, in the hopes she might charm him into a confession of sorts. She ignored that she still wore a shawl. After all, she couldn't abandon common sense completely.

One pair of dark eyes distracted her, and her gaze connected with Cecil as he stared up at her. *Oh, dear heavens!* She clutched the railing as a wave of lightheadedness assailed her, and when a slow, steady smile curved his sensual mouth, tremors joined the tingles on her spine. The glimmer of desire in those depths put her at sixes and sevens. There was no use denying it any longer or making excuses. However it had happened, no matter that she'd known him less than a week, no matter that there was much she didn't know of him, she was tip over tail in love with Cecil Tame.

What do I do now?

It was nothing like she'd felt when her husband had courted her. This was like a lightning bolt, a hectic whirlwind that had carried her far from her everyday life, it was sudden and amazing, left a blinding heat behind, yet it made her breathless and nearly gasping with desperate need.

He hasn't declared himself. Perhaps he is only using me for amusement because I'm here and willing...

There was nothing for it. Despite the reservations, she'd committed to this evening. She had to continue her trek downstairs. Phoebe concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. When one's head was in the clouds, one had to think hard about the simple task of walking. Once she gained the ground floor, she'd barely taken two steps toward the corridor split when Cecil intercepted her. "Good evening, Mr. Tame." She grinned. At least she'd not gotten tongue-tied.

"Good evening, Miss Pennyroyal." He grabbed one of her hands and pressed a light kiss to the back. "Where are your gloves tonight, Phoebe?"

She reclaimed her hand; otherwise, she feared she'd burn to ash in front of him. Or throw herself shamelessly into his arms, and that wouldn't do, not when the young people were about. "We're going to the shore. Wetness and gloves simply do not mix."

"What would we do without your impeccable common sense?"

Mischief twinkled in his dark gaze. "Shall we depart?"

"I suppose we should." If she had a firm grip on common sense, she wouldn't accompany them, but the prospect of spending more time with him pulled her in that stronger direction. To put it plainly, she simply had to be where he was.

"Yes, come, Miss Pennyroyal." Emily tugged on one of Phoebe's hands as she caught them up. "I'll wager this evening will be one of a kind." With a gaggle of laughing party members clustering around, Emily led Phoebe through the lower floor then out the back door.

Chilly air brushed over her cheeks, but it wasn't so unpleasant that it would keep her from enjoying the night. The shoreline was quiet, devoid of any signs of life—human or animal. The nearly full moon peeked out from behind a cloud bank. Its light reflected on the dark water's surface leaving a silver puddle on the surface. "Emily, look, there is a ring around the moon."

"How splendid!" the girl cried with true pleasure in her tone. "If there is snow, I shall be so happy. I couldn't have asked for a better evening."

It would seem Emily was still very much a child. "Where should we set up the picnic?" Not that there was much of a meal to speak of. Mostly there was a loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, a bunch of grapes and a carafe of lemonade and one of coffee.

"How about here?" Emily pointed to a relatively smooth patch of sand, twelve feet or so from the incoming tide. "It's still in sight of the house... if one was to peek out the third story maid's window." Her trilling laughter rang about the shore.

Phoebe frowned. "What does it matter if it's in sight of house? We'll all be out here—chaperones included."

The girls ignored the question as a few of them spread out an old, ratty quilt on the sand. "Sit, Uncle Cecil." Emily grabbed the willow basket from one of the boys and settled it onto a corner of the quilt. "You should have the prime spot." When she giggled, a few of the others did too. "You as well, Miss Pennyroyal. It's only fair the adults in the party—"

"Wait. This is too nice, too cozy, especially for you Emily," Cecil interrupted. He glanced at Phoebe and his lips curved with amusement. "What's going on?"

"How would I know?" Phoebe looked closer at the girl, but in the shadows, it was too difficult to read her expression. Try as she might, she couldn't stop herself from glancing at Cecil. Her heart skipped a beat. "You best explain, Miss Bertrand."

"I thought it would be more pleasant for all of us if you and my uncle enjoy stargazing out here while my friends and I go back inside and teach ourselves to play whist." She giggled and the other girls

joined her. "It's the height of fashion, but none of our adult acquaintances ever have time to let us learn. Cook agreed to help us if we hit a snag."

Max cleared his throat and stepped forward next to Emily. "I give you my word that I'll watch over them and make certain they don't do anything untoward. It's all right. Trust me."

"Yes, because we all know Max cannot possibly do something as maddening as have fun." Emily sniffed. He stared until Max edged away. "He takes after you, Miss Pennyroyal, so we'll be perfect ladies and gentlemen."

"I'm not sure." Phoebe shook her head. Was Max not fitting in with the young people? "Since I'm a chaperone of this party, I really should accompany you. Either me or your uncle." And what did Max mean that it would be all right? Was he in on this potential scandal?

"No!" Emily vigorously shook her head. "Miss Pennyroyal," she stepped forward and clasped Phoebe's hands. "Don't you remember our conversation from this morning?"

"Yes, of course." Phoebe frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?" Was this Emily's way of making certain she could spend time with a beau without interference from one of the adults?

Emily came closer and her grip tightened. "Don't you owe it to yourself to find out if those feelings you spoke of are real, to see if there's a chance they can develop into something even more wonderful?" She dropped her voice. "To see if the heat has staying power?"

What the devil is happening? "I beg your pardon?" Phoebe shot a glance at Cecil, who stood by with his hands clasped behind his back and a bemused expression on his face. Clearly, he had no idea what had occurred that morning and equally as clearly, he wouldn't put a halt to it.

Emily squeezed her hand. "Spend some time with my uncle. I think he's sweet on you, and you feel the same as him. But you need—deserve—time alone with him. I promise we won't spy."

"Right." Phoebe reeled from the younger woman's insight. "Perhaps you are correct, but it's hardly proper." Except, if put against what she and Cecil had done together on Christmas, this meeting was above reproach.

The girl rolled her eyes. "If it will set your mind at ease, I will come back out in an hour, which is why I wanted the blanket put in sight of the house." She simpered. "Please don't do anything I wouldn't do, and don't land in a scandalbroth, but if you do, I won't say a word."

"You are an instigator, Emily, but thank you." She glanced at Cecil as he reclined on the quilt. Flutters filled her belly at the wicked glint

in his dark eyes as he gazed at her. "Can I assume you agree with your niece's reasoning?"

"Of course. She's quite a remarkable young lady." He waved the young people off. "Everyone has been gifted with one hour of freedom—all of us. Once sixty minutes are up, that's it. We're all back together again."

Emily released Phoebe's hand. She mock-glared at him. "Behave, Uncle Cecil. I don't want you scaring Miss Pennyroyal away. She's good to have around and you could do worse."

Once the children departed for the house, Phoebe sighed. "That wasn't well done of her and baldly obvious."

A laugh escaped him and the waves tossed the sound back. "I hope you're not afraid, Phoebe. I thought being manipulated by our own flesh and blood rather exhilarating if not a tad annoying. At least they are for the match."

"The match? Does that mean you wish for something to come of what is between us?" There was no sense dancing about the issue. After all, she was efficient.

"Patience, my dear." He patted the empty space on the quilt beside him. "Please. Join me. Do something improper with me—again."

Her common sense screamed to return to the house, but the curious woman she was urged her to do as he suggested, as did the heated flutters filling her core. Feeling daring and a little naughty, she dropped to the quilt, and when he quirked a dark eyebrow, she laid down beside him, careful to arrange her skirts about her legs. There must be some decorum after all even as every pore of her body cried out for his touch. "We cannot do what we did the other night... here."

"Ah, but you do wish to indulge in that again then?" When she remained silent, he chuckled. "No, we cannot, but you realize there probably won't be much star gazing tonight," he began in a conversational tone as he tucked his hands behind his head and stared at the night sky. "If I had my way, I'd spend this hour kissing you senseless."

"Oh God." She folded her hands over her stomach, wishing the flutters would settle, hoping they didn't. She quite enjoyed this feeling. "Yet, they cannot see us unless they are at that particular window..."

"Don't tempt me more than you already do." He grabbed her hand and threaded their fingers together. "Ah Phoebe, there is much to say, but nothing I want to waste a precious hour discussing."

She frowned. How long did a declaration take? "Well, regardless, it is a nice change of pace to be outside and without the rain, even if it lasts only a short time." Clouds constantly shifted and scuttled across the sky. A few stars were visible, but the bulk of the heavens were

obscured. In the end, it didn't matter. Even if the sky were clear, she wouldn't have been able to concentrate on it, not while Cecil lay warm by her side, so close but yet so far. Never in her wildest dreams did she ever think that she—Miss Pennyroyal, headmistress of a girl's academy—would be lying on a quilt, next to a man she barely knew—a man she'd made love with—staring into a night sky, alone with him, aching to know his touch and to touch him in return.

"As a way of changing the subject, might I say how fetching you look tonight? The chance to view your wrists has me in the seventh heaven of delight."

"You've seen much more of me than a wrist, cheeky man."

"Aye." He turned his head. She did the same. Their noses almost bumped. If she wanted, she could kiss him. "I live for the day when I can gaze upon you in a ball gown or something suitable to a rout or party."

"Why does my wardrobe interest you?"

"Well, I would adore gazing at you in nothing at all, too." He rose up and leaned on an elbow, looking down on her with an expression that promised wicked things in the dark and privacy of a bedroom. "My dear, even if you chose to wear burlap and ashes, I'd still think you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen." He drew a fingertip along the side of her face and then cupped her cheek, his fingers furrowing into her hair. "I hope you understand what I'm trying to say."

Oh, she understood, and it was terrifying and wonderful all at the same time. "I believe so, but perhaps you should clarify. It could be a rather messy situation if we're not thinking the same thing." She trembled from his caress. "For if I appeared in your bedchamber dressed for a ball, that would send the wrong message entirely."

"Or arriving at a rout clothed in nothing but the golden waterfall of your hair." He drew his hand down the column of her neck, over her shoulder and then dared to cover one of her breasts. "In the event you aren't aware, I wish to court you, Miss Pennyroyal."

"Oh Cecil." She adored it when he spoke so directly. It saved so much time. Phoebe turned her head and looked into the sky again. Drizzle touched her cheeks and cooled her overheated skin. Laughter bubbled in her throat and escaped past her parted lips. It was all so very humorous.

"What's funny? It kills a man's ego when he stops short of a declaration and the woman he's attempting to woo laughs at him." A trace of annoyance clung to his voice. "Does this mean you do not feel the same? That what we shared meant nothing?"

"No, oh no." She giggled again. "You silly man, I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at me." She turned her head and caught his gaze,

moved further into him so that he could embrace her. "Life is quite a lark. Just when I think I have my life and path sorted and categorized, it shifts violently and leads me off into the unknown again."

"This is true, but you must admit that jumping into the unknown does, at times, hold the greatest mystery and its own adventure." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his body. Every point of her pressed into every point of him. It left nothing to the imagination. "Will you chase the unknown with me?"

Was it possible to be terrified and ecstatic about a prospect at the same time? Her heart beat in triple time, but she lifted her hands and held his face between her palms. "Will you remain in Brighton for a while?"

"Until Emily completes her Come Out, yes."

That gave her a year or so. Then she could decide to travel the world with him. "Then yes. I believe I will jump head first into the void with you." For better or for worse, she wanted to see where a relationship with him would lead.

"You have no idea how happy that makes me. I had assumed I'd walk my path alone until I met you." The whispered words brushed her face seconds before he lowered his lips to hers.

Phoebe sighed with relief against his mouth. She slid a hand around his nape and tugged him closer as she settled into the kiss. There was so much promise behind the simple embrace that she fought to keep silly, juvenile tears from crowding her throat. She nibbled on his bottom lip, thrilled when he did the same to her. Warmth infused her veins and chased away the chill. When he moved over her mouth, she mirrored his movements, and in that moment, the rest of her resistance and doubts faded away.

"Oh Cecil, what am I to do with you?"

His laughter held a smug edge. "Kiss me for a while then we can make arrangements, perhaps for an assignation where I know the children cannot see."

"That is an agreeable plan." She looped her arms around his shoulders and parted her lips, encouraging him to deepen the kiss. The proper induction into scandal wasn't as horrible as she'd once thought.

Chapter 12

Cecil couldn't get enough of her satiny lips, but if he didn't stop kissing her, they'd both be in the drink, not to mention the embarrassment if Emily came upon them in such an intimate moment. He would much rather chart a course over Phoebe's naked flesh in the privacy of his rooms.

When he reluctantly pulled away and she sighed, his chest tightened. *I understand completely.* He could spend hours, days, months in her arms and never tire. "Never have I been as quickly enamored or enchanted with a woman as I am with you." He flopped onto his back and trained his gaze on the empty patch of sky where a few stars peeked out from the film of clouds. "Wherever have you been hiding, my dear?"

"It is rather surprising." Phoebe sat up. She looked down at him, searching out his gaze. Light danced in her eyes, and her easy smile warmed his insides. A few tendrils of hair had escaped her ever-present bun and framed her face. "I didn't think love would come again into my life, especially not at my advanced age. Yet, here you are. Miraculous, really."

His breath stalled and his chest tightened. She'd said *love*. Did she truly mean it? He didn't want to ruin the moment by asking for clarification. "I believe much of what people say of age is in their heads. If you feel young, then you are."

"That makes sense." She brushed a few strands of hair away from his brow that the breeze had displaced. "Regardless of age, you are way too much of a temptation, as is the relative privacy of this beach. As much as I wish to burrow my hands beneath your shirt, perhaps explore that interesting bulge I spy in your breeches, it's beginning to rain, so I'm going back to the house."

His Phoebe was nothing if not adorably shocking and bold. Was there ever a better woman for him than her? "Perhaps that would be best, for if you give me even the slightest encouragement, I'll ruck

your skirts up about your waist and create a scandal to end all scandals for those young people.” When she gasped, he grabbed her hand and pressed a kiss upon the middle knuckle. “Thank you for this moment.”

“Thank you. For everything.” She slid her hand from his. “Don’t linger out here long. I’ll save you a place near me by the fire. Or perhaps I’ll teach the children how to play a proper hand of whist.”

“I have no doubt that whatever you choose to do, it will be perfect.”

“So, is midnight a good enough time for a meeting?” She leaned over him and pressed her lips to his. Traces of roses lingered behind when she pulled away.

“I cannot wait. Let’s hope the children retire early.” A tremor moved through his heart while Phoebe returned to the house. Left alone with his thoughts, Cecil levered into a sitting position and trained his gaze on the dark waves rolling toward the shore. *I cannot bear the thought of letting her walk out of my life once a real companion for Emily is secured.* Yes, he’d asked permission to court her, but that was very different than having her with him every day and every night.

The idea of asking Phoebe to marry him took hold. The thought of spending the rest of his years with her by his side quickened his breath and squeezed his heart. She’d be the perfect helpmeet, and he would be afforded all the time in the world to discover her secrets. A smile tugged at his lips. Oh, what an adventure that would be if her recent brazen behavior was any indication. His cock hardened at the thought. Above all, he needed to know what Max thought of the pairing. Max was the man in her life and her self-appointed protector. Perhaps he needed to ask the boy’s permission first. Plus, such a move would gain the young man’s respect and would go a long way into keeping the peace if everything went well.

No time like the present, old boy.

Cecil stood. He gathered the basket as well as the quilt, folded the blanket over his arm and then set out for the house. Once inside, he handed his items to the butler, and he snagged Max just as the group was setting up for another round of mattress sailing. Obviously, they’d grown bored with card play. “Could I have a moment of your time, Mr. Snell?”

“Of course.” Max quirked an eyebrow but nodded.

“Please come with me into my study. I’d like to ask you something.” He led the way, and by the time he’d settled behind his desk, Max had taken a chair in front of it. “It’s no secret how much I admire and respect your mother.” He folded his hands on top of his desk to keep from fidgeting. His stomach clenched. It was quite nerve-

wracking to make such a decision then share it with the son of his lady fair. He'd thought himself long past an age where he'd need to secure someone's blessing. "With your permission, I'd like to ask for her hand."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and thick. The ticking of his desk clock marked time, the only sound punctuating the horrible quiet. Just when Cecil wanted to shout merely for variety, Max spoke.

"That is a very nice sentiment, Mr. Tame, but I'm afraid I must refuse." The boy rose. He tugged on the bottom of his waistcoat. "I simply haven't seen the proof of your regard, and it has only been inside of a week since you've met my mother."

"I understand that, but perhaps you aren't aware of how deep my feelings go." As much as he wanted to argue with the youth, he tamped the urge. After all, he didn't truly need Max' permission. Asking him was only a courtesy. He'd need to ask Phoebe her opinion on how to gain her son's respect, and his rejection hadn't quelled Cecil's desire to propose to her.

"Be that as it may, sir. I'd rather not see my mother elevate her hopes then have them crash down when something in your life prevents you from going through with the nuptials. Or worse, breaking her heart when the urge to travel sets in. She already has a life."

"Fair enough." Cecil waved him off. "Go rejoin your friends. I thank you for your time."

With a nod, Max slipped from the room.

Cecil sighed. He planted his elbows on his desk then dropped his head into his hands. Why did everything need to be so complicated? He loved Phoebe. She returned that regard—he hoped. For the moment, he had a responsibility to Emily, and from all accounts, it seemed the girl had given her blessing to a possible union between them. Why couldn't Max see the logic of a union based in love?

People rarely had such a wonderful chance as this.

He shot to his feet. His gaze fell to the liquors and wines in crystal decanters on the credenza behind his desk. The thought of drowning his disappointment in drink rankled, but neither did the idea of walking the darkened shore appeal. *Devil take it.* If it weren't for the handful of young people in the foyer, he could retire early and strategize his next move, wait for Phoebe to join him in his chambers. They would talk about their future after they'd made love.

A scream from somewhere nearby forced his hand and brought him pelting across the room. The commotion sounded as if it came from the stairs. He ran in that direction, his heart in his throat. As he arrived in the foyer, Emily and her friends were clustered tightly around Phoebe, who lay crumpled on her side at the bottom. A

mattress rested cockeyed midway up the stairs.

Dear God! "What happened?" Cecil demanded. His chest was tight as if the roof had collapsed upon it. "Someone tell me what caused Miss Pennyroyal to be in this state." His pulse roared in his ears. "Now, Emily if you please. I won't ask again." His voice was much more harsh than he'd intended, but he didn't care.

Emily glanced at him, her face white, her eyes wide and round. "We grew bored with whist. One of the boys suggested we do mattress sledding again. Miss Pennyroyal insisted she take a turn. She was in such a gay mood. We tried to convince her not to, but she kept on. Her eyes were so bright and her smile so convincing, we couldn't refuse." Emily fluttered her hands about as her words grew rushed. "She said she was only as old as she felt, and that she felt it would be grand fun to do the mattress thing because life was amazing when one really looked at it."

Oh Phoebe. My poor love.

One of the other girls took up the story at that point. She twirled a brown curl around her finger. "But halfway down, a corner of the mattress caught in the spindles. It stopped, but she did not."

"She flew off and hit her head on the wall," Emily finished, her voice breaking. "After that, she slid down the rest of the way." The girl bit her bottom lip. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "Do you think she's injured badly? She hasn't moved. I'm afraid, Uncle Cecil."

"I don't know." He squeezed her hand. "It's too soon for me to guess." With his heart in his throat, he pushed through the clustering adolescents. "Everyone go into the parlor and wait for me there. Someone run and find Banks. Tell him he might need to ride for the doctor."

The young people backed away and gave him a wide berth, but they didn't vacate the area as he asked. Cecil didn't care. His only thoughts were for Phoebe.

He knelt beside her. "Phoebe? Can you hear me?" His pulse thundered in his temples as he gently felt her neck, and when he'd ascertained it wasn't broken, he laid her onto her back. She had a lump on her forehead with the faintest trickle of blood marring her pale skin. A scrape decorated her chin. "Dearest, please wake up." When one traveled the world, one saw men and women die from much less. A cursory examination with his fingers determined nothing was amiss, but he died a thousand deaths until her eyelids flickered. "Phoebe? My love, are you well?"

Finally, she opened her eyes and the blue depths swam with happiness. She smiled up at him. "Hello Cecil. Do you want to take a ride? It's just the thing to keep occupied during the holiday, and it doesn't matter what your age is."

A few gasps of relief escaped the girls clustered behind him.

"No, I don't want to ride the mattress, but I do need to make certain your brain is unharmed." He wanted to cry with relief, but he shoved the urge away. After all, he needed to set an example.

She frowned, looking much like her usual self except for her position on his floor. Was she paralyzed? Was that why she hadn't moved? "That doesn't sound like fun, and after you already treated me to a lovely evening with such delicious words and kisses that would make any woman swoon." A blush stained her cheeks. Her eyes were over bright. "Do you remember?"

Heat rushed up the back of his neck. He was nearly sick with worry. Why wouldn't she move? "Yes. I remember. However, I need to ask you a few questions to confirm your mind is sound."

"I'm certain it is, but is yours? Love makes people do madcap things, don't you think?"

"Phoebe, darling, you're not making sense." Terror clogged his throat. When she squirmed into a sitting position, he asked, "What month is it?" Thank the heavens she was able to move. His shoulders sagged with relief.

"December." She winced as she touched her fingertips to her injury. "It is the Christmastime season and you kissed me by the evergreen tree in the parlor."

"Good." He ignored her telling words and died a thousand deaths as he felt the children's eyes bore into him. "What's my niece's name?"

"Emily, or should I say, Miss Bertrand. I am headmistress at her school." Phoebe slid a glance to him. Her smile could rival the sun. "Are you satisfied?"

"Not yet." Not until she could stand and think at the same time. "Do you feel lightheaded? Can you count to ten, backward and forward?"

Rapidly, and with cool efficiency, Phoebe rattled off the requested numbers in the requested sequences. "I'm not disoriented, if that's your concern. My head aches, but that is to be expected." The gaze she landed on him was so full of heat, he shifted in his spot. "However, I *am* slightly embarrassed. It was silly of me to attempt that stunt." She wetted her lips and he couldn't help but follow the movement. "And yes, I am lightheaded, but it has nothing to do with my fall."

When she smiled again and cupped his cheek, Cecil was lost. He wanted to see that smile every day, every night, in good times and bad, for the rest of his life. He wanted to know what else would make her grin, what would make her laugh with abandon, what made her sad. Was she ticklish? Did she cry when she attended the opera? What was her favorite food? Did she scream when she saw a bug? "Oh

Phoebe.” Despite his audience, he tugged her into his lap and then brushed his lips over hers.

“Have you lost your mind?” she whispered as she pulled slightly away. Desire clouded her eyes.

“No, but I have come to an irrevocable conclusion.” He put a finger beneath her chin and lifted it so she had no choice except to meet his gaze full on. “I’ve been all over the world and have seen many things, but I’ve never been as terrified as I was just now when I saw you lying on the floor, when you didn’t move.”

Emily edged into his line of sight. “How sweet, Uncle Cecil. I never thought you were so romantic.”

“I agree.” Max stood next to Emily. He offered a large grin. “Mr. Tame, I’m reversing my decision. Any man who is so concerned about a woman after a tiny fall like that deserves to be leg-shackled and happy with her. Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you, my boy. I appreciate the confidence.” His heart pounded in a tight chest as he returned his regard to the woman in his lap, the woman who undoubtedly felt the evidence of his attraction.

Phoebe frowned. “What’s going on? Why do you both look like cats who’ve just eaten a host of canaries?”

Emily sucked in a breath. “Never say you’re going to do it, Uncle Cecil?” She clapped her hands. “How very romantic and exciting! I’d hoped that how the wind blew and that was the reason for the picnic, but this is quite something.”

“Yes, well, perhaps I should ask the lady before you offer premature congratulations.” He never removed his gaze from Phoebe. Her faint scent of roses teased his nose, but it was the weightless feeling of happiness that held him captive. He tightened his hold on her. “Phoebe Pennyroyal, or rather Snell, please say you’ll be my wife. I’ve come to suspect I won’t be complete unless you accept my hand in marriage, and I certainly won’t be as happy.”

Her highly kissable lips parted. Her eyes rounded in shock or surprise, he couldn’t say. “Perhaps it’s you who is suffering from a blow to the head instead of me.” A giggle escaped her. She stroked her fingers down the side of his face. “Are you quite in your right mind?”

“I am.” Cecil glanced at his audience. Every child there wore similar expressions of hope and anxiety as if they watched a play. Max nodded, presumably in encouragement. “And I’m very serious, my dear.” Not wishing to say the next bit out loud, he put his lips to the delicate shell of her ear and whispered, “If you don’t accept my proposal, I’ll just have to kiss you deeply in front of all of these young people until you accept my offer. And if that doesn’t work, I will make mad, passionate love to you all through the night until I hear your agreement.”

She gasped. "You wouldn't." But her grin betrayed her wont of him to do just that.

"I might if I need additional leverage." He grinned and raised his voice to a more normal level. "I'd rather you say yes because you return my regard instead of obligation. Though many marriages might start off that way, I'd prefer if ours began with love."

A fierce blush swept into Phoebe's cheeks. "You love me?"

"I do. Could you not figure that out by this point?" Cecil adored the color that betrayed her deeper emotions. Would the rest of her flush under high passion? "You've thoroughly enchanted me this week, Phoebe. I cannot endure the thought I won't have the honor of having you by my side for the rest of my life."

Tears pooled in her eyes, magnifying their blue. "I didn't want to hope, but I cannot deny I feel the same. It smacked me in the head much like that wall did." When she smiled, her chin wobbled. "Yes, yes, of course I'll marry you, Cecil. I've loved you since you ran into me in the school hallway." She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him close. "I'd hoped you would ask, but feared it was just a silly dream more suited to schoolgirls than women my age."

Hearty applause rang through the foyer and congratulations filled the air. "Oh, Uncle, that was the most romantic thing I've ever seen," Emily told him. She closed the distance between them, leaned down and dropped a kiss on his cheek. "Whatever will I call Miss Pennyroyal now?" She moved to Phoebe and kissed her cheek as well. "I'm so glad you'll be with me even longer."

Phoebe snorted. "For the moment, Phoebe will suffice. We can discuss other options later, but we will most definitely need to find a new companion. It just won't do for me to live under the same roof now."

"I'll inquire around town tomorrow, but I intend to marry you as soon as can be arranged. I won't wait to claim my bride." Though he'd claim her body thoroughly tonight once the household slept. Joy bubbled up and swelled his chest. A faint movement at the window near the door caught his attention, and his bliss overflowed. "Emily, I believe it is snowing. Perhaps you and your party would like to go outside?"

"We would indeed, Uncle, if only to give you a few moments of privacy." He didn't like the knowing look she bestowed upon him as she herded her friends out the door.

Phoebe made a sound of protest. "They are not properly dressed for the weather."

"Let them go, my love. It will be all right." He tapped the end of her nose. "That girl will be trouble in another couple years."

"You'd best start watching her now," Phoebe rejoined. "It's not as

if we've given her the best of examples."

"I disagree." He kissed her lips. "Showing Emily what real love looks like is the best foundation."

Banks arrived on the scene with a discreet throat clearing. "Do you require assistance, Mr. Tame?"

"Yes, actually. Please assist the lady up. I'm rather too old to remain sitting on this chilly floor." Once Banks helped Phoebe into a standing position, Cecil struggled to his feet as well. There was a decided ache in his backside.

"Do you still require a doctor, sir?" Banks raised an eyebrow as he glanced between him and Phoebe.

"No, thank you. Miss Pennyroyal has merely received a bump to her head, but perhaps we should consider the mattress game concluded for the night."

"Capital idea. I'll just tidy up." Banks bowed then gained the stairs, turning to the task of hauling the mattress back to the bedroom it came from.

Once they were alone, Cecil took possession of her hands. How was it possible she'd become so dear to him in such a short time or that he'd existed without her this long? "I'm so glad you accepted my proposal."

"I was happy to do so." Phoebe tucked a fallen strand of hair into its bun. She pinned him with her direct gaze. "But there is something I need to know. Do you truly desire me?"

Cecil frowned. "I was under the impression I'd conveyed how I felt, but if you require more proof," he dropped his voice, "I will endeavor to show you as many times tonight as you need."

A shiver wracked her shoulders. "Yes, but perhaps I want to hear it a different way." She moistened her bottom lip and he stifled a groan. "I'm not exactly in the first or second blush of youth, and I'm a mother besides. I don't look at the world with wide-eyed innocence that someone ten years younger would. Does that change your opinion of me?"

"It absolutely does not." Cecil didn't like that trace of doubt in her eyes. "In fact, your age and experience are two reasons that make you irresistible to me." He tugged her into his arms and held her close. "Perhaps a grand romance doesn't belong exclusively to the young. Like fine wines and cheeses, love needs to age in order to be truly appreciated."

A slow smile curved her lips as she pulled back. "So, now I belong on an aging rack in a cellar somewhere?"

Cecil slid his hands upward and cupped her face. The tremble that moved through her transferred to him. "Darling, know this: being with you makes me feel as if I were a young man again, as if I could fly if I

jumped from the roof or swim from here to America. I cannot wait to start my life with you."

"You are too charming for you own good."

"Aye, perhaps I am. Do you take issue with being leg-shackled to such a rogue?"

"Well, someone has to make the sacrifice." She moved and pressed her lips to his. Several minutes passed as they indulged in long, drugging kisses that left him heated and very much aroused. Drat the house being full of young people. It quite put a damper on a man's desires. "And you are quite potent."

He grinned as soon as she pulled away. Passion clouded her gorgeous eyes. "That I am. But then, you *are* a siren." Not able to help himself, Cecil stole another kiss and this time was hard pressed not to let it carry him away. When he broke the embrace, he heaved a shuddering sigh. "Where should we begin our adventure together? We can go anywhere in the world. What is the desire of your heart?"

"Besides you?" Phoebe's grin sent tickles into his soul and heat through his groin. "Are you brave enough to start here on England's shores, in your bedchambers once the house is quiet, or are you not interested in being tamed for Christmas?" She winked and he lost his heart all over again.

"That is one adventure I'm anxious to embark upon." He held her in a tight hug and rested his chin on her head. "As long as you're by my side, anywhere we go is exciting enough."

The End

Chapter 13

Fifth of December, 1818, three minutes to midnight

“S o, Eastden, how is the old broken heart faring?” Thornwich’s

voice rang out through the dining room of White’s Gentlemen’s Club, but no one really noticed. To a gentleman, everyone was as far into his cups as were Nick and his friends – if one could call them friends.

If truth be told, the company in town at this time of year, early December, left a lot to be desired. Every gentleman around this table was as dissolute as he. They were all rakes and libertines, even the married ones, and at this moment in time they were all utterly foxed.

Nick swirled the brandy in his glass and watched it coat the inside before dribbling back into the pool of dark amber liquid. Then he looked up at the man who had just spoken.

“Broken-hearted, Thornwich? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Lady Angela—Sedgewick’s daughter. You seemed very keen on her during the season and then suddenly she was betrothed to the bastard son of the Duke of Hawkhill.”

“Mm, yes,” mused Nick, trying to sound non-committal. “I am sure she is very happy with Mr Stevenson and he is obscenely rich.”

“I hear she is already increasing, Eastden. It’s not yours, is it?”

Nick tried to focus on his tormenter. What in devil’s name was he doing here with this ass?

“Unlike you, Thornwich, I do not make a habit of ruining young ladies of the *ton*.”

A murmur moved around the table.

“God’s teeth, Eastden, you’re not suddenly going to become my moral compass. I married the young lady I ruined... well, one of them anyway.” He grinned around at his friends, some of whom nodded appreciatively at his joke while others suddenly became consumed with checking the contents of their own glasses.

“No, Thornwich. You have to live with the fact that two young ladies are now spinsters due to your reckless behaviour and the fact you seduced and ruined them. Not to mention the servants you have no doubt bedded. I was merely pointing out that I am not like you and since the only way to save your scrawny little neck was to marry Lady Edna, I would have expected nothing less of you.”

He was not entirely sure where his sudden moral outrage had come from. Thornwich had been his friend when they were boys. They had learned to fish together, they had dragged each other back to their feet after their first tumbles from horses and they had skimmed stones across his father's lake. Thornwich had never quite matched Nick's tally of nine skips.

Now Thornwich was an earl, had married Lady Edna Barrow, a pretty enough daughter of a viscount, but he still kept a number of mistresses and preferred to be in London with his rakehell friends than out at Thornwich with his perfectly lovely wife. The man was a fool.

Nick was vaguely aware of the clock chiming midnight in the hallway outside the dining room.

“You are just as dissolute as I am, Eastden,” Thornwich sneered. “The difference is that I am already an earl and that I am already married. You seem incapable of attaining either state of being.”

“I am not sure how you expect me to become an earl short of murdering my own father, which is ludicrous. As for marriage, I could have been married a hundred times over. When I walk into a ballroom all the mamas with marriageable daughters look at me with expectation.”

“Yet you remain a bachelor with no heir to carry on the earldom should your father outlive you.”

“I choose to remain a bachelor. Devil take it, I could be married by Christmas if I so decided, Thornwich.” It was the brandy talking. Nick knew it. This was his chance to shut his mouth and retreat.

“That sounds dangerously close to a wager, old man.”

“Do not tempt me, Thornwich, for you would lose.”

“Hmm, it is after midnight so it is now St Nicholas' Day. It would seem we are now in the Christmas season. Ten thousand pounds says you cannot marry my spinster sister before Christmas Day.”

“Your spinster sister? You mean Gabriella?”

“Yes. I mean Gabriella. She is eight and twenty and I would gladly pay someone to take her off my hands. She has had nine seasons and not one proposal of marriage. Besides, since you will no doubt lose, I could use the money.”

Nick looked around the table. All the men were now watching him avidly. It was a stupid bet but he had been put on the spot. Somehow he knew he was going to regret it in the morning but one look at

Thornwich's smug expression and something snapped inside him.

He had grown up with Gabby too. Their fathers' estates neighboured each other and until he had been sent away to school, Gabby, not Thornwich, had been his best friend. He had seen her on many occasions since her come out and now he came to think of it, he had no idea why he had never asked her to dance or even approached her to chat. Something niggled at the back of his mind. They had drifted apart, of course. It had been bound to happen but something had spoiled their friendship. Perhaps their parents had quarrelled. That was probably it. Why had she never married, though?

And then he remembered. The large strawberry birthmark across her cheek and nose. How had he managed to forget that? But surely that would not be enough to stop anyone asking for her hand. It was only a birthmark.

Perhaps because he had grown up with her and she had always just been Gabby that he had never really noticed the mark. As for his lack of gentlemanly behaviour, he had no answers. Thornwich's mouth had turned into a sneer. He was trying to set not just Nick up to fail but Gabriella too. What a cad.

"I shall accept your wager, Lord Thornwich." He turned to a footman. "The betting book, please," he said. He turned back to his adversary. "We leave tomorrow morning for your country estate."



Gabriella looked up from the ledger and rubbed her eyes, looking around her father's office and judging it dark enough to start lighting candles. It must be nearly four o'clock in the afternoon if it was already getting dark. No matter how she tried to make her sums add up they would not.

At that moment there was a sharp rap at the door and Gabriella bade the housekeeper to enter, along with a footman carrying a tray of sandwiches, cakes and tea.

"I apologise, Milady, but I knew you would forget to ring for tea so I took the liberty of getting cook to prepare a tray for you. I hope you don't mind."

The footman placed the tray on the desk, bowed and set about lighting candles all around the room. Gabriella smiled at the older woman who had all but brought Gabriella up. Of course, there had been governesses and nannies but it had always been to Mrs

McAllister whom Gabriella would run when she fell and hurt her knee or when other children would taunt her over her birthmark.

"Please sit and have tea with me, Mrs McAllister."

"Oh Milady, I'm not sure..."

"I insist," Gabriella said in a tone that brooked no reply. They played this game every day. The housekeeper knew that Gabriella was lonely and needed someone to talk to but she would never presume to be invited to sit for tea, despite two cups and saucers being set on the tray.

"As you wish," replied Mrs McAllister, sitting on the other side of the desk.

"Billy, did the Thatcher fix your mother's roof?" she asked as the footman bowed and prepared to leave.

"Yes, Milady. She was very pleased with it. She asked me to thank you but I forgot." The young man blushed furiously and Gabriella smiled kindly at him.

"Worry not, Billy, it shall be our secret."

"Yes, Milady. Thank you, Milady."

With that, he scurried off into the dark foyer to light some more candles. Gabby sighed. She had managed to pay for just one roof to be fixed. Billy's mother's roof had been the worst. However, there was no money for the rest.

"Perhaps you should think again about a companion, Lady Gabby," said the housekeeper as Gabriella poured the tea. The housekeeper was the only person she allowed to call her Gabby and even then, it was only when they were in private.

"We have been though this, Peggy. I am fine. I did try to find a companion but none suited. They were all so..."

She waved her hand, trying to think of a polite way to put it. Every woman she had interviewed seemed to be a foretaste of what she was about to become, an unwanted, unloved and bitter spinster. She may be alone but she had her work cut out for her running the estate.

Joseph, her brother, was a feckless wastrel with the most unpleasant wife. That said, Gabriella supposed that Edna had reason to be angry at the world. She had married a man who seemed intent on bedding every female in England, save herself. She'd had two miscarriages and was presently increasing again. Gabriella hoped for Edna's sake that the pregnancy would go well.

Peggy McAllister accepted the cup of tea.

"I know, lovey. I just worry about you is all."

"I am fine. I just need to convince my brother to release funds so I can make some repairs to the tenants' cottages and the stables. I shall write to him tonight."

A noise outside made Gabriella turn towards the window. She

recognised the coach pulling up in front of the ancient manor's front doors. The Thornwich crest was emblazoned on the side, bigger than most crests, making the whole thing look preposterous.

"Looks like you will be able to save your paper, Milady," said Peggy, standing and smoothing down her apron.

What Gabriella saw next turned her blood cold. Stepping out of her brother's travelling coach was none other than Viscount Eastden—Nicholas, her childhood friend. She had not spoken to him since that awful day when they were twelve years old and he had taunted her, telling her she was ugly and would end up an old spinster. The sad truth was he had been correct.

Chapter 14

Gabriella rose and glanced down at her appearance. Devil take

it. Why could her brother not have had the decency to let her know to expect a visitor? At least she would have worn something slightly more appropriate than her faded blue muslin day gown. She patted her blonde hair, wondering how much of the severe knot had come down as she had frustrated herself over the figures in the estate ledger. She had not even put any powder over her birthmark to minimise it. No-one in Thornwich Manor cared how ugly she looked.

Well, there was no point worrying about it now. She took a deep breath and walked into the foyer just as Joseph, Edna and Lord Eastden marched into the manor. Joseph's eyes lit on Gabriella and his expression became a sneer, as did Edna's.

"My darling sister. You remember Lord Eastden, of course." Gabriella curtsied politely at the man who bowed low and graciously to her. He had already removed his hat. Gabriella's breath hitched. The man was gorgeous. She had seen him at balls over the years but had never paid too much attention. For all his comment had been a silly, childish remark made in a fit of pique at her not allowing him to play with her new puppy, it still hurt.

"My lady. It is a pleasure. We have waited far too long to become reacquainted with each other."

"As I recall, my lord, you sent me to the devil at our last meeting and I have not yet reached there. I assumed you would not want to be acquainted with a lady who disobeyed your orders."

"I did?" Lord Eastden looked genuinely shocked and perplexed. "I do humbly beg your pardon, my lady. I do not recall saying such a thing. I shall not seek to make any excuses but I do beg your forgiveness for any offence I caused."

She waved away his apology. It was sixteen years too late in any case. She found it difficult to believe that he could not remember the cruel words and the curl of his lip.

"If everyone wants to go into the drawing room, I shall arrange for a tea tray while your rooms are being prepared. My lord," she turned to her brother, "I apologise. Had I known you were coming, I would have had your room and our guest's room prepared."

"Now, now, Gabs, don't be a spoilsport. You know I like to live in the moment."

"I shall order the tea," announced Edna. "I am, after all, lady of this house." Gabriella bit her tongue and nodded graciously at the countess.

"Of course, my lady. I do apologise for presuming."

"You can join us for tea if you wish, Gabriella, though I am not sure you are exactly dressed for visitors." Edna's gaze roved up and down Gabriella's attire and she could feel heat burn her cheeks.

"Thank you, but I beg you excuse me. I have work to finish."

"Have you organised dinner?" asked her sister-in-law.

"You have only just arrived. I was not expecting you."

The countess clicked her fingers at the footman standing to attention at the drawing room door.

"Fetch a tea tray, boy, and tell Mrs McAllister we expect dinner to be served at seven o'clock."

"Aye, my lady." Billy bowed and hurried off to do his mistress's bidding. Gabriella hated the way Edna spoke to the servants. She turned to her brother.

"My lord, if you'll excuse me?" She curtsied to her brother and then to their guest and hurried off in the direction of the long sweeping staircase, desperate for the sanctuary of her own suite of rooms.



As much as Nick tried to remember whatever it was he had said

to Gabby to upset her so, even all these years later, he could not recall it. He lay in the bath in his room, trying to remember anything after her teary farewell the day before he had gone to Eton. He had promised to write and tell her all about school and the other boys and the masters and his lessons but he never had. He had been caught up in his new life and even his mother had been lucky to get one quickly scrawled missive per term.

But that was not what had upset her. He could tell.

"My lord, you shall be late for dinner if you do not hurry." Carter,

his valet, stood beside the tub brandishing a razor.

“Ah yes. I do apologise. I was wool gathering.”

“Very good, sir, but it is nearly half past six.”

“Indeed.” Nick pulled himself to his feet and allowed the man to wrap a linen around him. He would work things out with Gabriella later and perhaps tell her about the wager. It seemed the right thing to do.



When he walked into the drawing room half an hour later,

clean-shaven, washed and dressed in one of his best dinner coats, his eyes alighted on Gabriella. He had travelled all day with Thornwich and his countess, bitterly regretting his stupid wager of the night before. But the wager was now in White's betting book and he had plans for the money he had saved from his generous allowance. He did not want to give it up to a wastrel like Thornwich. He had to win and he needed to get Gabriella on his side—either by telling her the truth, a gamble in itself—or by wooing her.

“Joseph, please. Three tenants need completely new roofs and...” But Thornwich held his hand up to his sister as he noticed their visitor had arrived. Gabriella blushed delightfully and turned to look in his direction. Her gaze swept up his length, making Nick's blood warm.

Or perhaps it was the dark red, high-waisted, low-cut gown that warmed his blood. It was a gown more suited to a young widow than an innocent lady, even one who was eight and twenty. The neckline of her dress had gold braiding, drawing attention to her perfect breasts. A gold chain hung around her slender neck, a large ruby pendant sitting just above the top of her cleavage. Her hairstyle was less severe this evening and curls framed her face, while the rest of her hair was piled high, making her appear slightly taller than she was.

As he worked to tamp down his physical reaction to her, suddenly the idea of marrying her, and more importantly bedding her, did not seem like quite such an onerous task anymore. How, though, would he go about convincing her to marry him in less than three weeks?

“My lord, would you like a drink?”

At this point, however, the gong went in the downstairs hall, calling them into dinner. Nick smiled at Gabriella while she frowned at the brandy decanter she had just indicated. The earl and countess moved to precede them downstairs and into the dining room. Nick

held out his arm and Gabriella reluctantly placed her gloved hand on his sleeve.

He looked down at her as they walked sedately downstairs but the woman he intended to marry looked straight ahead, her pert little nose in the air. He was on the side of her birthmark and, if he was honest, it was not particularly bad. Yes, it was obvious and it did mar her features somewhat but it was only skin discolouration and with her pink lips set in a little pout of disapproval, he had the sudden urge to kiss her.

Unfortunately, the woman's stiff posture and inability to look him in the eye told him that it would take some effort for him to win this St Nicholas' Day wager.

Chapter 15

“P lease, Mr Brown, the tenants’ roofs are in need of repair.

Water is leaking in and the draughts make it impossible for some to keep a fire lit. I can pay you in the spring once the new lambs have been sold at market.” Lady Gabriella’s voice drifted down the large hallway and Nick stopped, tapping his riding crop against his boot as he listened to his childhood friend’s plea.

“Lady Gabriella, you know I would fix them if I could but... I have mouths to feed too, my lady. Thatching is my only source of income. I need payment and so do my men. I am sorry, your ladyship, but there is nothing I can do if you do not have the funds to pay me.”

“What about jewellery? I only have a few necklaces owned by my mama but I could give you them.” There was a pause and Nick moved nearer to the open door. He could see Gabriella’s visitor. He was young, maybe thirty years old, sturdily built and wearing clothes that set him apart as a manual labourer.

“Perhaps you could sell them in London, my lady, and then pay me in money. I have no use for jewels and who would buy them out here in the country?”

Gabriella sighed. Nick’s heart went out to her. She’d probably known this fellow for years and this would be a very uncomfortable conversation.

“Is there nothing I can say to make you change your mind?” Her defeat was evident in her voice and it hurt him to hear it. It seemed that Thornwich had left his sister to manage the estate, which did not come as a huge surprise to Nick.

He tapped lightly on the door but did not wait for permission and simply entered. She looked up at him, surprise evident on her features. He smiled, hoping to set her at ease but her surprise turned into an unwelcoming scowl.

“Mr Brown, how much money do you need to fix the roofs of the tenants’ houses?”

“Most of the houses need some kind of repair, my lord, and I have men to pay. I do not work alone.”

“How much?”

“Really? This is too much,” butted in Lady Gabriella. Nick raised a hand and surprisingly she stopped speaking. Gabriella had never been one to keep her mouth shut when she had something to say. Even as a child she’d been precocious, regularly getting in trouble with her nanny for being far too forthcoming for a young lady.

“Fifty pounds.”

“Fifty?”

“Aye, like I said, most roofs need something done.”

Nick pulled his money purse out of the pocket of his coat. “Thirty pounds now and the rest when you have finished.”

“Seems fair,” said the thatcher. Nick watched him as he accepted the money. The man’s expression didn’t change. His eyes did not light up with greed. This was a fair wage for fair work and both men knew it and so did Gabriella. Out of the corner of his eye, he could practically see the steam coming from the blonde woman’s ears. She was enraged by him but good manners prevented her from saying anything.

“I expect good work for my money, Brown. If I hear you’ve cheated Lady Gabriella...”

“I promise, my lord, you will not find fault in my work.” The man pocketed his money, bowed to both Gabriella and Nick and hurried out of the room.

Gabriella waited until the man was walking back up the private road to the village before she rounded on Nick.

“Of all the high-handed, boorish, rude, obnoxious...”

Again, Nick raised his hand and good breeding prevented her from saying more. He turned and closed the door.

“I think we need some privacy,” he said simply.

“Open the door at once, you brute. It is not proper for you and me to be alone together.”

“Hush, my lady. Please do not give yourself a fit of the vapours. I plan to marry you anyway.”

Gabriella clasped a hand over her cleavage, grabbing a hold on the desk to steady herself. Her face was ashen and her mouth gaped before she gathered her wits enough to stutter out a couple of words.

“You... do?”

“I do,” he said firmly. He had wanted to woo her and convince her to marry him when he had first set out on this wager but he had a feeling that Gabriella would prefer honesty and he was going to be brutally honest.

“And do I have a choice?” Her lips were set in a thin line and her

brow was furrowed, her gaze rather ferocious for a young lady of good breeding. Two spots of dark colour on her cheeks showed her displeasure at the turn of events.

“Not really. You see, there is a wager in the betting book at White’s Gentlemen’s Club which says that I will not be married to you by Christmas. The wager was made by the Earl of Thornwich.” Gabriella’s mouth had dropped open in shock. “I wagered that I would be married to you by Christmas. There is ten thousand pounds resting on the outcome of it.”

“Pardon!” Her voice had risen almost to a screech and she looked around as if hoping for some other escape from the study but of course, there was none. “Joseph does not have ten thousand pounds. What do you think that discussion with the thatcher was about?”

“No, it appears that he does not.”

“Why would you do that? Why would you wager someone else’s life in such a cavalier manner? I understand that women are naught but property but...” her voice trailed off, hurt and bewilderment now evident in her expression. He felt like a cad.

“I was foxed. I know it is no excuse. I did not think that Thornwich would actually go through with it and then I realised the joke was on you as much as on me. He was setting us both up to fail. It may not mean much to you, Lady Gabriella, but honour demanded that I accept the bet once the challenge was issued. Had I tried to weasel out of it, well... gentlemen can be cruel and I would not have been the one to whom their cruelty nor to whom the wagging tongues of the Beau Monde would have been directed. ”

“So you agreed this wager to protect me?” Gabriella pushed at a curl of hair that had come free from the severe knot of her coiffure. “I do not believe you, my lord. You are as selfish and cruel as is my brother.” She made a move towards the door but he blocked her way.

“Please, Gabby, wait! Listen to me. I thought about this last night. I considered whether I should just seduce you and claim a love match or if I should tell you the truth. I chose the truth because I believe you deserve to know. Friendship and love can grow. We come from a society that expects arranged marriages. From what little I have seen of you today and yesterday, I have the utmost respect for you and you are quite lovely. I see no reason for a marriage not to work. Please, let us try.”

“My lord, I have not given you leave to make free with my given name, let alone a pet name none but my dearest friends use.”

“We used to be friends,” he persisted. He would not feel bad for calling her by the name she used to insist that he use.

“Not anymore. I am no longer a child of twelve, Lord Eastden.”

His gaze swept up her slender body, over the perfectly respectable

lavender muslin day gown until it rested on her bosom. He had accepted his fate and it was not an unpleasant one. Ever since he had agreed the wager, his mind had shifted to the inevitability of bedding Gabriella. And he was eager to do so—when the time was right. His mouth was dry and he licked his lips as he imagined peeling the dress off, untying her stays and weighing those perfect globes in his hands.

“No, Lady Gabriella, you are most definitely not a child anymore.”



No one had ever looked at Gabriella like that before. Nicholas—

Lord Eastden looked like a cat readying itself to pounce on a mouse. His gaze seemed transfixed on her breasts and it made her feel uncomfortable and yet... it also made her feel beautiful and wanted. She shook her head. What a ridiculous idea. She was ugly. He had said so himself.

He dragged his gaze back up to her face and for a moment she dared to believe that he had changed his mind. There was no look of revulsion or disdain in his features. His eyes were hooded and, again, he licked his lips. That pink tongue sent her insides fluttering like birds.

“You know it makes sense, Gabby. You need a husband, I need a wife. Then when Thornwich admits to being unable to pay his end of the wager, we can force him to take on a man of business to run the estates, under the threat of me calling in his debt.”

“He does not need a man of business. I run the estate perfectly well.”

“I have just been out riding and I agree, you are doing a marvellous job, but Thornwich remains in control and makes stupid wagers with money you need to improve the lives of your tenants and estate workers. You are powerless to stop him from wasting money.”

“I...” She was confused and tired and unsettled by the goings on over the past day. He spoke sense but she was not ready to relinquish control yet. “I shall pay you back as soon as we have sold this year’s lambs.”

“And what of next year, Gabby? What of the year after? Even if I lose and have to give your brother ten thousand pounds, how much of that do you think you shall see for repairs and other estate matters?”

Gabriella sighed. He was correct, of course but marrying him was a rather drastic step.

What he had said before made sense. Perhaps love and devotion could grow. He was certainly a very attractive man.

"I am not sure," she said weakly, knowing she must gain some time to consider the matter properly. Of course, she'd had no other offers—ever—and he was a respectable gentleman with a good title and money. She would be a fool to turn him down. He moved close to her... even closer than if they were waltzing in Almack's and she was forced to raise her eyes to meet his dark brown gaze. Her heart seemed to miss a beat as he moved his mouth tantalisingly close to hers.

"If I need to seduce you, Lady Gabriella, I am up to the task."

"You would force yourself upon me?" she said, aghast. He chuckled and placed his hand under her chin.

"No, my love. I have never yet had to force a woman into my bed. I am not about to start now. When you come to my bed, you shall come willingly... oh, so willingly, Gabby." He touched his nose to hers and she thought she may get her first kiss. Her heart felt like it was thudding right out of her chest and she had the urge to press her body closer to his. She wanted to feel those taut muscles against her softer curves. But then he straightened, backed towards the door, turned the knob and bowed.

"Think about it, my lady," he said before he turned and walked out.

Gabriella allowed her bottom to rest fully on the desk as she drew in a long, slow breath. She didn't know what to think. Once upon a time, Nick had been the centre of her world. They had been the best of friends, slaying dragons, sailing the seven seas, exploring the new world and sometimes even playing house when Gabriella whined enough and Nick was in the mood to cave in to her demands. Then he had hurt her and she'd not seen him again, bar a few glimpses at balls during her fruitless London Seasons.

Now here he was with a proposal of marriage and a devastating smile that caused her stomach to knot and her breath to hitch. Oh dear, she was just so confused.



Nick lay in bed, tossing and turning and running over in his mind how to convince Gabriella to marry him. He could not help but think she had been tempted by his bold, honest proposition. Gabriella

had always been a sensible chit and she was getting on in years. She appeared to have no other marriage prospects and his proposal did make financial sense. However, she was a female and despite some of them claiming to be practical and pragmatic, he suspected most ladies wanted romance too.

He turned onto his side, pulling the blankets over his shoulders. His mind filled with imaginings of Gabriella lying on a pillow, her hair splayed out over it, her lips swollen from his kisses and the skin on her chest and breasts scraped by his day beard. He tried to push the thoughts away. It wouldn't do for him to have to tamp down his frustrations again and he was growing hard again at the thought of her.

She had taunted him all evening with her low-cut neckline, the long eyelashes she had batted whenever he caught her gaze and the arse which teased and tempted as she walked.

They had not discussed their earlier conversation at all during the day or during dinner and the ensuing game of cards but Nick knew she was considering it. How to push her to the next stage, though? She was an innocent, so seducing her would have to be done carefully so as not to frighten her.

He flung himself onto his back. This was no good. He couldn't get her out of his mind and sleep was not going to happen at this rate. He needed a plan and in order to formulate one, he needed some exercise. He threw the covers off, marched over to the chair and hauled on the breeches he had worn the day before. It was a full moon outside, the perfect weather for a middle of the night walk.



Gabriella sat on the large seat at her bedroom window, watching

a fox sniff the frozen ground in search of food. The poor thing would find nothing to eat around the old manor house. The weather had been crisp and cold for days now and the ground was rock hard.

The fox raised its head, listened for a moment and then fled. Gabriella lifted her eyebrow, wondering what could have frightened the creature. A figure appeared in the silvery light of moon, hunched up against the cold, but unmistakeably Viscount Eastden. Unfortunately, his greatcoat covered up his lean, muscular form, but she still had memories of him striding into her office, his breeches stretched over his thighs, showing off every muscle and sinew and

causing her to blush and feel altogether too warm.

What was he doing and why was he walking out of doors in the middle of the night on a freezing December night?

She pulled her blanket around her shoulders. Could she really marry this man? And would he really try to seduce her? Excitement and fear wended their way through her and she shivered despite the heavy woollen blanket.

Nicholas was now out of sight but she contemplated life with him. She had heard he was a rake and a libertine but he was still popular among the mamas of the *ton* as he was heir to a very wealthy earldom and because it seemed he did not debauch innocents or cause scandals. Did Gabriella want Nick to seduce her? It was a question she had yet to consider. After all, he intended to marry her so she would not be ruined if he succeeded.

For the first time Gabriella wondered how much of his reputation Viscount Eastden deserved. Was he just a man with healthy male appetites or was he mad, bad and dangerous to know, in the same way Lord Byron was? Gabriella chuckled to herself. Nick was definitely not as scandalous as the poet. Of that she was sure.

She did not see that she had much choice. If she did not marry him, then her family was financially ruined, even with his ten thousand pound wager. And she would still be unmarried, ugly and poor.

Her brother was never going to change. He had always been rather feckless and while he was not evil, their father had never really been firm with him. Their mother had doted on him and then both their parents had died when Gabriella was just fourteen and Joseph sixteen. Just a boy, really. Their drunkard of an uncle had done the absolute minimum necessary as their guardian until Joseph came of age then just over a year ago Joseph had married Edna.

It seemed that Edna had taken a dislike to Gabriella from the start and Gabriella knew not why. Was it the easy camaraderie she had with the servants, most of whom she'd known from childhood or was it something else? Did Edna think Joseph had spent too much money on Gabriella's fruitless seasons in London trying in vain to find a suitor?

Returning her mind to the question at hand, she thought about reasons not to marry Lord Eastden. Truth be told, she could think of few but there was hardly a queue of suitors outside her door. Marrying Lord Eastden may be her only escape from a life of doing her brother's bidding. Perhaps it was time for Lady Gabriella Seymour to look after Lady Gabriella Seymour and damn the consequences.

Chapter 16

“D id you have a nice walk last night?” Lady Gabriella said as

she spread jam over her toast the next morning. Only Nick and Gabriella had so far come down to breakfast. It seemed the earl and countess still preferred London hours, even while in the country.

“Last night?”

“Yes, I saw you walking across the east lawn, sometime around two o’clock.”

He raised an eyebrow and lifted his coffee. Had she been spying on him? Oh, he liked the idea of that immensely.

“Pray tell how you were aware of my movements at such an ungodly hour?”

“My bedchamber overlooks the east lawn and I was watching out of the window. I could not sleep. You scared off a fox.”

“Yes, I saw the fox,” he mused, storing away the snippet of information about where her bedchamber was in relation to the rest of the sprawling manor. “Why could you not sleep? Was it because of my proposition?”

She lifted her gaze to his. Intense brown eyes surveyed him, her blonde brows furrowed and her luscious lips pursed.

“We shall marry on Christmas Eve. I assume you will arrange a special licence from the Bishop?” she enquired after a moment or two.

“Um, yes. Yes, of course.” He could not quite believe his ears. She was saying yes with nary a question. His chest was bursting with pride and hope. He actually felt happy. “I will take good care of you, Gabby. I promise.”

“Good.” She nodded. “And it’s Gabriella to you.” With that she stood and swept out of the room.



Gabriella patted the nose of Snowy, her white mare. The horse

nickered and munched on a piece of carrot that Gabriella had acquired from the kitchen. Snowy was Gabriella's only companion other than Mrs McAllister. The horse understood her moods and temperament as much as any human being could.

"I know, my beauty. You want to gallop too but it is too icy to take such a risk. We shall instead trot into the village to see the vicar and the ladies of the Christmas fete organising committee. No doubt the children shall pet you and feed you grass and thoroughly spoil you, so don't feel too bad."

The horse snorted as Gabriella patted its neck.

"Is this a private trip into the village or can anyone join?"

Gabriella started but recovered almost instantly, turning around to meet the dark gaze of Lord Eastden.

"My lord, you startled me," she chastised, her gaze resting on his muscled thighs beneath the form-fitting pantaloons. She still could not quite believe she had agreed to wed such a fine specimen of manhood. Of course, it was still a bit of a shock she had agreed to marry the boy who had called her ugly. Did he still think her birthmark ugly? Could he now just ignore it?

His greatcoat was open and she envied him the warm woollen garment. Why did women's clothes have to be pretty rather than practical? She was already cold despite her long woollen pelisse and fur-lined bonnet.

"I apologise, but may I join you? I believe it would be worthwhile for us to spend time together and get to know one another."

"I shall be busy in the village. There is the church nativity scene to attend to, the vicar to meet to discuss the Christmas services and the village festivities to arrange. I am afraid you shall find it dreadfully tedious."

He smiled and chuckled.

"I have business with the vicar myself. I believe he will have an extra service to perform on the morning of Christmas Eve." Her brown eyes widened and her colour rose. He seemed to study her for a moment. "Are you having second thoughts, Gabriella? Your answer seems to have been rather hasty and much though I want you to marry me, I want you to be happy about it."

She sighed and turned around to face him properly.

"My lord..."

"Nick."

"Nick, then. I am marrying you because I want to get away from

my brother and my sister-in-law and no longer be a burden to them. I am also marrying you because you asked and no one else is likely to come begging for my hand. It is a young lady's sole purpose in life to marry well and produce heirs for her husband. You shall be an earl one day. That is much more than I could have ever hoped for. I have no doubt that this will be a typical arranged *ton* marriage. We shall see each other two or three times a year once you have an heir and a spare and you shall keep lovers and mistresses. Everyone will look on in pity, thinking that I am none the wiser even though I shall know every woman whose bed you warm and I shall be fine because that is what is expected of ladies. Let us not lie to ourselves and pretend this is a love match."

Her little speech seemed to rock him back on his heels. She watched his Adam's apple move up and down his throat as he swallowed, a frown marring those perfect features. He whacked his riding crop against his booted foot and then he removed his hat and speared his fingers through his dark curls, consternation plain on his features.

"Do you not feel anything for me? Not even...I don't know... attraction?"

Attraction? Of course she felt attracted to him. He was like a Greek god.

"You are very handsome," she conceded. "Everyone will know that you only married me because of a bet. After all, no one wanted me before the wager, did they?" The groom appeared at that moment. "Jones, can you help me onto Snowy?"

"Yes, my lady."

"No! Allow me."

In three long strides, her betrothed was at her side, his hands on her waist, ready to lift her onto the horse but before he did, he leaned his head close, his lips near her ear.

"There will be no other lovers or mistresses, my darling. We shall live together, both in town and in the country, and you shall be head over ears in love with me by the time you say, 'I do.'"



Nick unceremoniously dumped two wooden wise men on the floor of the sanctuary of Thornwich Parish Church as Gabriella hurried through the door of the church.

“Oh Nick, you got the whole nativity set out of the cupboard. Oh, you are a dear.” Her cheeks were pink from the cold and she plucked off her gloves as she rushed down the aisle. His heart leapt at the sight of her. “The vicar’s wife wanted to talk about the Christmas Eve service. I couldn’t get away.” She untied her bonnet and left it and her gloves on a pew before removing her warm pelisse and approaching the altar.

“I only have a couple of pieces left to retrieve,” Nick said, indicating the wooden statuettes.

“Thank you...” she began but he waved away her words and headed back into the dark and dusty cupboard inside the vestry to collect the last parts of the nativity. The dust was making him sneeze, his buff pantaloons were filthy and had a hand mark on his thigh and he was absolutely positive there were still cobwebs clinging to his hair.

He was pleased, however, that he had accompanied her. She would have struggled to pull the heavy figurines out of the cupboard to be cleaned and set out for next week’s service. Besides, it would have taken her a lot longer.

There was only the crib and the baby Jesus to go. When he picked up the crib, he realised it was broken. The lengthwise piece of wood that ensured the wooden saviour would not fall out had been snapped, more than likely by accident. There were all manner of things in the cupboard and Nick did not imagine that anyone had damaged the crib on purpose.

Feeling that it would be somewhat irreverent for him to drop the baby Jesus out of the crib while moving it, he lifted the wooden infant from its crib and cradled it, much as he had cradled his cousin’s children. This baby was much quieter and did not squirm about ferociously as the twins had. Though to be fair, it was quite a bit smaller than his baby second cousins had been.

He picked up the crib in his spare hand and marched back into the main part of the church to find Gabriella sitting between Mary and Joseph, dusting off the virgin. Gabriella looked up, smiling. Again his heart flipped. Damn her, he really was falling for the chit.

“I am afraid the crib seems to have met with some sort of accident sometime during the year.” He held up the damaged item but Gabriella seemed to be uninterested. Her gaze was transfixed on the baby Jesus he was cradling gently. “Don’t worry, there is only minor damage and the baby Jesus seems to be fine,” he said, smiling and trying in vain to understand the strange look that seemed to have come over the face of his companion.

She seemed wistful. How odd. He looked down at his wooden bundle and scowled. Did she just really like Christmas and go all

sentimental at any baby Jesus or was it just the woman thing of squealing and cooing over babies, even the pretend ones? He shook his head. Ladies really were a mystery.

"If I can get some wood, nails and a hammer I can fix it easily enough," he offered.

"What? Oh, pardon. Yes. Well, you could try the vicarage. The vicar will be out on his rounds but I am sure Mrs Roberts will be able to find the vicar's tools. He's quite handy and fixes a lot of things around the parish."

He placed the crib on the floor and handed the baby Jesus to Gabriella. She cradled it the way he had, wiping her cleaning cloth over its head as if soothing the wooden child. He wanted to snort.

"A vicar who knows how to mend things, eh? Whatever next?"

"I know," she said grinning. "Almost as unlikely as a viscount who knows how to wield a hammer and nails."

He grinned back, executed a slight bow and caught her gaze. "Touché, my love."

She blushed. He grinned even wider.

He hurried out the church in search of tools. Yes, this had been an excellent idea for an outing. Gabriella was more relaxed and was genuinely happy. He could sense it and he knew she had appreciated his help. He had also enjoyed the sight of her riding her horse. She was a capable horsewoman, graceful in the saddle and fully in control of her mount at all times. He never failed to be amazed how women could ride so well on those ridiculous side saddles.

The day had confirmed to him that asking Gabriella to marry him was a good idea. They would do well together. She was biddable but had a fire that would keep him on his toes. She was not meek and mild. That would never do. She may be willing to sail the seven seas with him but every so often she would still force him to play house, just as it had been in the old days. He suppressed a chuckle at the thought.

Chapter 17

“G ood grief, Gabs, have you nothing better to wear to dinner

when we have a guest?” moaned Edna, her lip curling into a sneer. Gabriella cursed the heat rising in her cheeks as she looked up defiantly into Edna’s glinting black eyes.

“No, I do not. My brother has stopped my pin money because he cannot afford it.” Of course, Edna already knew. In fact, Gabriella knew that Edna had been the one to suggest it to Joseph. Her brother had made an unconvincing protest about it being a tad unfair but alas, her brother was a weak man and a woman like Edna had him wrapped around her little finger.

A footstep in the doorway to the drawing room made her flush deeper. Had Lord Eastden heard that? She hoped not. Though if he had, at least he would understand why her only silk dress had been mended so many times and looked so drab and unfashionable. She did not want him thinking that she spoke ill of her brother even when all she uttered was the truth.

Joseph came in a second or two after Lord Eastden. His gaze quickly assessed her attire and he frowned, curling his lip.

How dare he? It was his fault she had no decent gowns.

She stood up, prepared to offer their guest a drink before dinner but Edna spoke to Lord Eastden before she had the chance.

“My lord, I must introduce you to my young cousin, Lady Arabella Foxdean, when next we are in company together. I believe you would be enchanted by her and, much though I hate to sound like an interfering female relative, I do believe you would make a good match. She is the daughter of a duke, you know.”

Lord Eastden nodded solemnly as if giving the idea due consideration. “I would imagine your cousin is as delightful as you are, Lady Thornwich, and in other circumstances I would be delighted to pay court to Lady Arabella but alas, my heart has been captured by another.”

“My dear Lord Eastden,” Edna trilled, her lips turning up in what Gabriella assumed passed for a smile from her sister by marriage. Not that she saw Edna smile. “It is time to forget Lady Angela, for she is now the Duchess of Hawkhill. I never took you for being the type of gentleman to remain broken-hearted for long.”

Lord Eastden seemed to suck a breath in through his teeth before turning a dazzling smile which did not quite reach his eyes, to her sister-in-law.

“*My dear* Lady Thornwich, while I am sure the society gossip column in your chosen scandal sheet was correct that early in the spring I did pay court to the current Duchess of Hawkhill, I assure you that I am neither heartbroken nor hankering after that particular lady.” With that he turned to Gabriella and took her hand in his.

Neither of them wore gloves and the warmth of his fingers wrapping lightly around hers sent a bolt of awareness through her body. His gaze met hers and now the smile did meet his eyes. “Gabriella, my love, I appreciate that our courtship has been short, to say the least, but it is my opinion that we shall be well-suited and that love can grow between us. I have always had a deep affection for you since our childhood and believe we will rub along well together. Thus I would be delighted if you would consent to be my wife. Gabby, will you marry me?”

Gabriella could not quite believe her ears. He was staring at her intently as Edna coughed and spluttered her upset at the turn of events. That in itself was almost worth getting married for. Lord Eastden squeezed her fingers lightly and his intent gaze became a look of pleading as the moments ticked by. Gabriella realised she’d just been standing, dumbfounded. A quick glance at Edna, who seemed to be recovering, told Gabriella that Edna thought she was about to refuse.

She could not make him look a fool and if she tarried any longer, that was exactly how he would look. She would appear to be about to refuse his suit.

“Yes, my lord, I would be honoured to marry you. I accept your proposal.” She looked into the brown depths of his eyes. He grinned and dropped one of her hands to ferret in his pocket, producing a small box. He opened it. Lying on a little cushion was a ring—a beautiful ring with a gold band, one large diamond in the centre and surrounded by small rubies.

“I apologise that it is not new. It was my grandmother’s and she gave it to me, telling me to give it to my wife when I eventually settled down. She died during my first term at Eton.”

“I remember,” Gabriella said softly. She did remember the old dowager countess with her ugly wig, ear horn and toothless grin. She

had never complained about children and always had a little bowl of sweets, which she handed out at regular intervals to the children. Gabriella had loved going to the Chetfern estate as a child and now she looked down at the late Countess of Chetfern's ring and sadness washed over her.

She extended her hand and Lord Eastden slipped it onto her ring finger. It fitted perfectly and Gabriella moved her hand to inspect it and delighted in the way it sparkled off the candlelight.

"Thank you, my lord," Gabriella managed as Lord Eastden lowered his face towards hers and pressed his lips softly and chastely to hers before drawing away.

"Time you started calling me Nick again, I think," he whispered just before he straightened.

At that moment the gong sounded for dinner and Gabriella accepted Nick's proffered arm, wrapping her fingers around his coat sleeve. Her legs felt like jelly and her head was swirling. Was she really going to marry Lord Eastden, heir to the Earldom of Chetfern?

Edna certainly looked none too happy about the turn of events and her brother was scowling furiously. It seemed he had just lost his wager.



"Gabriella!" Nick's voice rang out through the large hallway

as Gabriella began to ascend the stairs having bid everyone goodnight. She wasn't particularly tired but she could read for a few hours rather than suffering the company of her brother and his wife. She felt a little bad leaving Nick to fend for himself but he could do as she had done if he had a mind to.

She turned and watched him bound up the stairs two at a time until he reached her. His dark blue coat, light blue satin waistcoat and satin knee breeches made her bite her lip. He had good taste in clothes, a fashionable hairstyle and his personality had definitely improved from the twelve-year-old boy who had called her ugly.

"How can I help you, Nick?"

"You could let me walk you to your room." Her eyes widened in horror and he chuckled. "Only to the door of your bedchamber. I shall not be claiming my conjugal rights tonight." His gaze flicked down to her breasts and he licked his lips before lifting it back to hers. Heat burned in her cheeks and warmth spread through her to her most

intimate place. Was she wanton? She wanted him to kiss her, to touch her, to want her. Having explored her own body a little in the dark nights under her bed sheets, she had some idea of where she wanted him to touch her. She licked her own lips. "I would like to claim a kiss, however."

"What if someone sees?" she hissed.

"Then we shall be forced to marry. I do not see why that would be a problem since you have agreed to marry me already."

He offered her his arm and she took it, smiling shyly as he guided her up the rest of the wide sweeping staircase.

"The ring is beautiful," Gabriella started, feeling the need to fill the long silence as they walked.

"I am glad you like it. I know it is all rather rushed but I meant what I said. I think we shall suit rather nicely."

"I hope I can be a good wife to you and I promise I will not make a fuss about not attending balls and parties. I can understand why no man would want me on his arm. I am very good at blending into the background, despite this." She lifted her hand to her cheek and the ugly strawberry birthmark which marred her appearance so.

Nick turned and stared at her. They had begun to walk along the hallway that led to where her suite of rooms was situated.

"Devil take it, Gabby! Where in God's name did you get the notion that I would be embarrassed to have you on my arm? I don't give a fig about... about... about a god-damned birthmark. I have a mole behind my left knee. It's about the size of a gold sovereign. I hope you shall think none the less of me for that."

His dark eyes blazed as his arms thrashed about during his little speech. She blinked rapidly, not understanding his ire. Tears welled in her eyes and she bit her lip. How many times as a child had she tried to wash the darkened skin away? She leaned against the wall to place distance between them.

"But you think I'm ugly and I understand... I do..." she started.

"I do *not* think you are ugly. Whatever gave you such a ridiculous idea?"

"You did. You said I was ugly."

"When? When did I say you were ugly?"

"The summer after your first year at Eton. You came here and I would not allow you to play with the puppy the stable master had given me. You were too rough and he was just a baby and besides, you had not written to me like you had promised and I was hurt. You said I was ugly and would end up an old spinster. You said no one would want to marry a girl who looked like she had strawberry jam all over her face." Gabriella blinked back the tears. She would not cry in front of him. Let him try to wriggle out of his cruel words.

Nick's mouth dropped open and he stared at her, understanding dawning as the memories came to the fore. "Oh my God. So I did. I remember now."

"I think our parents quarrelled over it because neither you nor your family ever came back to Thornwich and we never visited Chetfern estate again."

"They did." His voice was quiet—his tone sombre. "I remember now my father using his switch on my derriere and telling me to learn to respect ladies. He gave me an almighty lecture about how appearances were immaterial and my ugly taunts were a bigger disgrace to my family than any birthmark could ever be."

"But your father was wrong, Nick. Appearances do matter. I'm not such a bad sort. I'm relatively easy to get along with, intelligent enough to hold a conversation without having to only discuss hair ribbons and bonnets and yet no one has ever asked me to waltz apart from the gentleman who was picked out for me by the patronesses of Almack's during my come out season. Not one gentleman, Nick. So you see, appearances do matter and so do birthmarks."

"I will not make excuses for my behaviour that day, Gabriella, except to say that I did not mean the hurtful things I said. I was a stupid, thoughtless, callow youth. I was annoyed at you for not allowing me to play with the puppy and I struck out. I was cruel and picked on something that was an easy target. What I said was mean and absolutely not true. Gabby, you are beautiful and clever and strong and..."

His gaze raked over her face as his tongue darted out to lick his lower lip. He took a step forward, effectively pinning her against the wall.

"Nick," she breathed, her hands coming up instinctively to rest on the shoulders of his woollen coat.

"Gabby," he all but growled as he placed his lips over hers. They were softer than she had ever imagined a man's lips would be and he coaxed her to follow his lead, massaging his lips against hers, relaxed but enticing.

She copied him, enjoying the rising excitement in her belly. He pushed his fingers into her coiffure as he splayed his other hand across the small of her back and the curve of her bottom. It was almost scandalous but when he moved even closer she could not find the will to ask him to stop. She wanted to know more of him and, at that moment, he pressed his tongue into her mouth.

She made a little whimpering sound at the back of her throat as she surrendered completely to him, spearing her own fingers through his dark curls and rising on her tiptoes to press nearer to him. She began to need him in the same way she needed the air in her lungs.

As he swept his tongue around her mouth one last time, a rumble came from his throat—a rumble that seemed to call to her, calling out to the world that she was his.

His kiss was deeper now, more urgent, and she matched his movements as she ran her free hand over the silk of his waistcoat. He seemed to be very muscular under all those layers of cloth. When her hand slipped onto his stomach he pulled away, catching her hand and pressing her palm against his lips.

Gabriella scowled. Why had he been allowed to have his hand entirely over her bottom but she could not touch him? She had wanted to feel his thighs and his bottom.

“Don’t frown so, Gabby.”

“I did something wrong?” she enquired.

“No, far from it, but here is not the place for explorations of that nature.”

“But you had your hand on my...” She could not say the word. Her cheeks burned and she now just wanted to escape from his penetrating gaze.

“I did and I apologise. I was carried away by the moment and by the taste of your sweet lips on mine.” She gave him a sceptical look. Was this the kind of thing men said to entice women to their beds? He chuckled. “My apologies for I am no Lord Byron,” he admitted.

“Considering the gossip even I have heard from London, that is no bad thing, Lord Eastden. Though, I cannot for the life of me understand exactly what it is he is said to have done to his wife.”

“Well, my darling Gabriella, I shall not be enlightening you any time soon. Perhaps when you are a married lady I can give you a general explanation of what he has done to scandalise society so. I have brought enough scandal on you by wagering that I could marry you by Christmas.”

“Yes. I do not think my brother and sister-in-law are at all pleased.”

“No, but let us not talk of them. There was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh?” Her curiosity was piqued.

“Will you come to Chetfern Estate tomorrow to see my parents? I want to tell them the good news and let them meet you again now you are an adult. I can ask your brother to borrow his carriage or we could ride there. It shall only take an hour or so.”

“Riding will be better. Joseph may not be keen to lend his carriage to the man to whom he shall soon owe ten thousand pounds.”

“I shall not take the money from him,” he assured her. “Or if he insists, I shall insist on him paying in small instalments.”

“That is more than he deserves. Shall we depart straight after

breakfast?"

"Yes."

"I shall see you in the morning." They had reached her door now.

"I look forward to it." He bent down and kissed her lightly on the lips, his hand coming up to touch her cheek with the birthmark. When he straightened, his hand lingered and Gabriella could feel her embarrassment rising. "My parents tell me that love grows between a man and a woman after they are married. Until I met you again, I was not convinced they were correct but with you, I see it as a distinct probability." Then he kissed her forehead, turned down the hall and strode away from her.

Chapter 18

Nick squinted at his bride-to-be, sitting proudly atop her snowy

white mare, manoeuvring the beast with ease over the uneven ground. He was beginning to think travelling round by the road had been the less sensible option since the hard frozen ground had deep ruts which made it difficult for both horses to walk easily. As a result, they travelled in single file along the centre of the track, the horses walking more easily over the frosty grass that carriage wheels never touched.

She looked back and smiled, her position on the side-saddle making it much easier for her than it would be for him.

“Are you well? We’re nearly there.”

“Yes, I know. I recognise this bit of road.”

A quarter of an hour later they were drawing their horses to a stop at the front of the blond sandstone mansion. The old abbey, which had been the country home of most of Nick’s ancestors, had been pulled down in the middle of the last century and this newer building had been erected in its place. It had only been completed in Nick’s grandfather’s time.

A groom came hurrying up to take the horses and Nick slid quickly off his horse before placing his hands on Gabriella’s waist, lifting her off her mare. The groom hurried away but Nick did not remove his hands. He bent so Gabriella was forced to lift her head to meet his gaze from beneath her bonnet.

He scowled at the frivolous item of clothing that did nothing to keep the poor thing warm. How much lace and trimmings were on the damned thing and how much was needed? Did any of it make a woman look good? Yet somehow, on Gabriella, it all looked utterly feminine and adorable.

“Thank you for coming,” he said brusquely before pressing a chaste kiss to her lips.

“You are welcome but I think you should let me go or even your servants will talk.”

“Let them. You shall be Lady Eastden soon—a viscountess—my viscountess.”

She smiled at him then—a shy smile that warmed his heart. Was she worried about the wedding night? Was it that aspect of marriage to him that had caused her cheeks to turn such a delightful shade of pink?

Suddenly the big oak door opened and the butler stood in the entryway.

“Rogers, nice to see you again.”

“My lord.” The butler bowed low then looked questioningly at Nick for some help as to how to address his guest. However, as Roger’s glanced at the woman beside him, recognition lit his eyes and his hand moved upwards slightly as if he was moving it towards his face, then he remembered himself. “Lady Gabriella. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Gabriella’s hand flew to her cheek and Nick glowered at the aging man.

“Please announce us to the earl and countess, Rogers,” Nick said, his tone more brusque than usual. He had been brought up to be polite to servants and to treat them well but he was not happy with Rogers at this moment in time.

“Of course, your lordship. If I may take your outdoor clothing then I shall show you to the blue drawing room.”

Nick helped Gabriella out of her thick woollen pelisse and removed his own greatcoat. He gave the butler his gloves and hat, as did Gabriella before they followed the old man to the first floor main drawing room for accepting guests. Nick motioned to a chaise, on which she perched her pert bottom, her back ramrod straight and her hands clasped delicately in her lap. She was the perfect lady and suddenly Nick had a number of visions of her doing some very unladylike things in a very unladylike state of dishabille on that very chaise.

Nick sat beside her. As he was trying to think of a polite topic of conversation, his mother appeared in the doorway. She glanced at him then looked to their guest.

“Lady Gabriella, it is wonderful to see you again after all this time.” She came forward and clasped his betrothed’s hands. Gabriella’s features broke into a warm smile as she squeezed the countesses fingers then found herself enveloped in a hug. His mother then took her hands again.

“I am sorry, my dear. I am just so delighted to see you. I wanted so very much to come and check you were well when your parents passed but I fear our quarrel had left deep wounds. I hope you can forgive the earl and myself.”

“Of course. There is nothing to forgive. Please, my lady, think no more on it.”

The countess's eyes sparkled with unshed tears. They were saved from any further uncomfortable discussion by the arrival of Nick's father. What little hair the man had left came out in unruly silver tufts above his ears. His brown eyes, the mirror of Nick's own eyes, glinted as he took in the scene.

“Gabriella, my dear, it is a delight to see you again. Time that blaggard of a son of mine did some fence mending between our families. How are you, boy? Still being a wastrel?”

“Well...” Nick started but stopped as his mother hurried over to the bell pull.

“We must have tea.”

Nick rolled his eyes. Tea could wait a few minutes, surely. Apparently not. Five minutes later tea was served and Nick was more nervous than he had been since his days in Eton when he had not practiced his Greek noun declensions and would have to suffer the ensuing corporal punishment for his laziness.

“Mother, Father,” he started, taking Gabriella's free hand in his. He noted the chinking of china as the hand holding her cup and saucer shook. “I would like to announce my engagement to Lady Gabriella. We are to be married on Christmas Eve.”

“Christmas Eve?” asked his mother, her expression a mixture of delight and concern. “What is the hurry? Oh Nick, you have not...”

“No, mother, what do you take me for?”

“So Lady Gabriella is not... umm... increasing?” his father put in, rather indelicately. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gabriella's eyes widen.

“Really, Father, if you were any other man, I would call you out for that remark.”

“Adam, that really was not well done of you,” Lady Chetfern remonstrated. “Gabriella, I do apologise for his lordship. He really can be a very rude man on occasions. I would put it down to age but he has always been like this. I fear it is poor breeding. Nicholas, why the hurry?”

Nick blushed. He could not lie to his parents and now they would think him a cad.

“I want to marry at Christmas,” Gabriella blurted out. “It is so romantic. A time of new beginnings with the birth of our Lord and yet the dark nights will give us ample opportunity to get to know each other better.”

The earl's jaw dropped before he lifted his hand and coughed to cover his bark of laughter. Nick noticed his mother pursing her lips to stop herself from looking amused at the unintentional suggestion from

his innocent bride-to-be.

“Quite so,” Nick remarked, slightly disturbed by his parents’ behaviour. He would have expected this from some of his bawdy friends but not his mother.

“Yes, it is rather romantic. I must say, I never realised my son had developed a *tendre* for you, Gabriella, but I am glad that he has. We will be delighted to have you as our daughter-in-law, shall we not, Adam?”

“Oh, of course,” muttered his father, seeming to have come to his senses. “Welcome to the family, my girl,” he added for good measure before turning his attention to his cake.



“I am so glad you agreed to stay for dinner and spend the night

here, Gabriella, my dear,” trilled the countess as the ladies retired to the drawing room while the gentlemen made their way into the library for a brandy. “I asked my maid to leave a brand new chemise and a nightgown out on the bed for you. I’ve assigned Sally, one of the kitchen maids who has attended a few guests, to be your maid while you stay here. If you bring your own maid when you marry...”

“Oh, one of our kitchen maids helps me dress. I do not have a lot of needs as my hair is simply pulled into a knot and my gowns tend to be relatively free of fuss and frills.”

“So I see and what of your trousseau, Gabriella? Has Lady Thornwich offered to take you to London to be fitted for and to choose your trousseau?”

Gabriella swallowed hard. She had no love for Edna but it felt rather dishonourable to explain to Lady Chetfern exactly what her relationship with her sister-in-law was like and that Gabriella would rather dig her eyes out with a spoon than go shopping with the woman.

“I... We... have not yet discussed the matter,” she answered lamely. “The betrothal happened rather quickly and then today we came to visit you.”

“I see. The reason I ask is that... well, my mother-in-law-to-be was the one who took me shopping for my trousseau. My mother had died and I had no siblings, just an aging great aunt. Adam’s mother stepped into the breach, as it were. We actually had quite a jolly time as she was less embarrassed than my poor mother would have been. Given

that you need to choose undergarments and night attire that will... well...that Nicholas will appreciate, it is sometimes easier with ladies to whom you are not so close. Do you think Lady Thornwich would mind awfully if I were to offer to take you to London for a couple of days? I do not have a daughter of my own and part of me would like to turn this into a tradition. Perhaps one day you could do it for your soon-to-be daughter-in-law."

Gabriella could not help thinking that Edna would be delighted to pass this duty off to Lady Chetfern. In fact she doubted very much whether Edna would even think of a trousseau.

"I am sure Lady Thornwich would not mind in the least but I really do not need such frivolous items, my lady. My night attire and undergarments are serviceable." Only Nick would know what dire circumstances her family was in and he only knew because he had been nosy and butted in.

"Nothing frivolous about it. It shall be my wedding gift to you."

"Oh no, Lady Chetfern. I could not possibly..."

The older woman put her hand on Gabriella's and smiled. "I do not wish to be indelicate, my dear, but the gossip around town is that your brother treats you abominably and that he has wagered away the family fortune. And while his circumstances are none of my concern, yours are because they are Nicholas's concern. I...I..." Lady Chetfern's eyes filled with tears. "I never forgave myself for not trying harder to heal the rift between your mother and me after the cruel things that Nicholas said to you that day. An apology now is worthless, Gabriella, but perhaps you will allow me this. A chance to make it up to you. A beautiful young woman like you should have a beautiful gown on your wedding day. Please come to London with me and allow me to make amends."

"My lady, there is no need."

"But there is a need, Gabriella. I will not force you but I would be delighted if you would accept my offer. If you would prefer it, I can always set up the accounts in Nick's name and he can pay for them, since he was the one who wronged you." Her smile was mischievous and Gabriella felt her resolve melting. She could not help thinking that Lady Chetfern was manipulating her, but somehow she did not mind. She was being manipulated for the right reasons.

Gabriella nodded her consent and the countess clapped her hands together in glee.

Gabriella sighed with contentment. She needed some new chemises and nightgowns. Her old ones were rather old and tatty now. Nick deserved a wife to have nice clean, cotton night attire that had not been hemmed so many times he could see her ankles. He would think her completely wanton.



“F

ather, I need you to have a word with Rogers.”

“Oh?” his father raised his eyebrow as he swirled his brandy in its glass and stretched his booted feet out in front of the fire. “Why?”

“When Gabriella and I arrived, he recognised her and called her by name.”

“It’s a butler’s duty to remember faces, Nick. That’s why he’s such a damned good butler and why much as I feel he should be pensioned off by now, I haven’t quite got round to it.”

“But Papa, he remembered her because of her birthmark and she was embarrassed.”

“Did he? Is that what he said? ‘Welcome Lady Gabriella, I would never have recognised you but for the strawberry birthmark on your cheek and nose?’”

“No, but...well he looked like he was about to raise his hand. It was an unconscious gesture, I’m sure, but all the same it made Gabriella uncomfortable.”

“Nick, the girl has not changed an iota since she was twelve years old, apart from the obvious... er... rather delightful enhancements. Had she never had that damned mark, she would still have been recognisable to Rogers since her family was here every month since she was born. Stop trying to offload your guilt about what happened onto my butler.”

“I am not. I accept full responsibility for what happened, as did my backside at the time.”

“Believe me, son, you got off lightly. If not for your mother being soft on you, you would still be locked in the nursery eating gruel. You did a lot of damage with one cruel remark. If Gabriella’s father had wanted justice for his daughter, I could have been staring down the barrel of a pistol at dawn in Hyde Park. Then where would you and your mother have been, eh? Tell me that boy? Ostracised? America? Thank God Thornwich walked away. We could have lost a lot more than the friendship of their family that day, son.”

“I know.” He gulped his brandy. He was sure the only reason he had not remembered was because of the shame he felt. Now it was as clear as day.

His father rubbed his chin and studied him. Nick felt as though he was twelve again and felt absolutely wretched.

“I know that you know, which is why I wonder at your reasons for marrying her. Why dredge up all these horrible memories? Do not

misunderstand me. She is a lovely young woman—accomplished, pretty, clever, demure—but why her, and why now?”

Nick speared his hair with his fingers. He really had to tell the truth.

“Her brother is an ass and so am I. Thornwich and I were in White’s and we were discussing the season and my penchant for a certain lady who is now a duchess. He was goading me and I was foxed. I told him I could marry by Christmas if I chose and he said it sounded like a wager. He wagered me that I could not get Gabriella to marry me by Christmas.” Throughout his speech, his father’s brows had furrowed deeper and deeper. “So I accepted the bet.”

“Devil take it, Nick. What the hell were you thinking? What if she finds out?”

“She already knows.”

His father jerked his head up, his eyes wide. Then he fumbled with his quizzing glass and looked at Nick through it as if Nick was some kind of plant specimen that should be examined.

“You told her?” Nick nodded. “And she accepted?”

“Obviously. I felt like a cad but I could not pull out of the wager. You know what the *ton* is like. Had I refused the wager, they would have found Gabriella wanting. They would have claimed that I could not stomach the idea of marrying her. I had to go through with it for her reputation and because of the circumstances, I thought she deserved the truth.”

“And yet I do not see her hand mark on your face, for you certainly deserve a slap from her!”

“Her brother is almost penniless. When I told her, I had just given the thatcher money to pay for mending the roofs of a number of the tenant’s cottages. It seems that Gabriella is doing the work of a man of business for her brother.”

“I see. I knew that Thornwich has massive gambling debts but I suppose I had never thought much on the impact it would have on Gabriella. It seems our whole family has done that girl a disservice. No matter now. Your mother is in the process of convincing her to come to London with us tomorrow. You may as well come too and you can visit the Archbishop of Canterbury for your special licence. Perhaps there will be a show on at Drury Lane and we can all go. You can stay in your bachelor apartment and Lady Gabriella can stay with your mama and me in the townhouse—for the sake of propriety.”

“Do you think mama can convince her?”

“Ha! Your mama can convince anyone of anything. Look at me. Thirty-two years I have been doing that woman’s bidding and there is no sign of me stopping anytime soon.”

Nick chuckled. His mother certainly was a force to

be reckoned with.

“Perhaps we should rejoin the ladies,” Nick suggested. He could not believe that after just an hour with his father he desperately wanted to see Gabriella again.

“Yes, but Nick, I promise you, if you hurt that young lady ever again, I will switch your arse again—this time until the skin comes off.”

Nick looked at the desk where his father had switched his backside the day he had called Lady Gabriella ugly. He winced at the mere thought.

“I promise, my lord, I would cut out my own heart before I would knowingly hurt her.”

“Good to hear, son. Now stop chastising yourself and let us go and see our lovely ladies.”

“**H**ave you seen this play performed before, my lady?” Nick

asked as he ushered her to their seat in the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

“No, we studied it at finishing school, but I have never seen a performance of it.”

“I always think it much better to see a play performed at the theatre than to study it from a book, would you not agree?”

“Of course, my lord.”

Nick sat down beside her and awaited his parents’ arrival. He glanced around the boxes opposite and saw rather a large number of ladies talking behind their fans. It was December—who needed a fan in December except to hide what was being said? But then the announcement of his and Gabriella’s engagement had been in this morning’s paper.

“I see we are the topic of most conversations tonight. We seem to have usurped poor Mr Shakespeare.”

“No doubt they are all expecting a happy event for us in seven or eight months,” Gabriella mused.

“Do you think?” Nick asked, astounded and amused by both her forthrightness and her lack of faith in their fellow humans.

“Well, they do not think you are marrying me for my beauty. However, a man may be captivated by my breasts for an evening or two. You certainly look at them often enough.”

“Gabby!”

She grinned at him.

“Do not look so scandalised, my lord. No one can hear. Your parents shall not get away from the Duke of Eckminster for quite some time. We may never see them again, for that matter.”

Nick laughed. “You are incorrigible my lady. If these people knew you as I know you, they would know I was marrying you for your mind and your personality as much as for your beauty and your breasts.”

“Nick!” The countess’s voice behind him made him wince. Devil take it! Why was it that Gabriella could talk about her breasts and not be caught but the moment he said it, his mother overheard. “Really, what an inappropriate subject. Anyone could have overheard you. Lady Gabriella, I do apologise for my son.”

He turned to find his bride-to-be with her own fan in front of her face, her skin beetroot-coloured and her eyes glinting in merriment as she suppressed her laughter. As the curtain rose, Gabriella seemed to calm down. She leaned close to him, her fan raised and whispered, “I believe we are now even for you calling me ugly. Next we must deal with the strawberry jam remark.”

“Touché,” he muttered as he turned his attention to the stage—anything to stop his gaze drifting back to her décolletage. She definitely had a very generous set of breasts which was one of her attributes that seemed to be keeping him awake at nights. He settled back in his seat. He really could not wait until Christmas. Then he could keep her awake at night... all night.



“**W**ould you like a drink?” Nick asked Gabriella as the curtain lowered at the end of Act One.

“I would, thank you.” Nick hurried away after offering a drink to both his parents. She was about to turn to speak to Lady Chetfern when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Gabriella!” She turned to look into the cold gaze of her brother.

“Joseph! How, umm, lovely to see you. How is Lady Thornwich?”

“At home in Thornwich, resting. She is rather overset that your wedding cannot wait until after the baby has been born.”

“The baby is not due until April.”

“Yes, but she is aware that people can tell she is increasing.”

“Of course they can. It is a perfectly natural state, you know.”

“Gabriella, if you cannot say anything kind about my wife, I should prefer you say nothing at all.”

Whenever Gabriella said anything to upset Joseph, he chastised her as though she was a naughty schoolgirl. She gritted her teeth and smiled pleasantly at her brother.

“Did you want to speak to me about anything in particular?”

“Yes, come for a short walk with me.”

She looked around but Nick had not arrived back yet and Lady

Chetfern was involved in a conversation with a lady whom Gabriella was unable to place. She nodded and followed her brother out of the box.

"I feel it is my duty to let you know about a wager between your betrothed and myself," the Earl of Thornwich began. Gabriella tried not to roll her eyes.

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, you see, I was rather stupid, Gabs, and I was utterly foxed. Eastden and I wagered he could not get you to marry him before Christmas. I know it was awful of me but I saw no harm in it. I thought it was a jest and now I see the announcement in the paper. I feel it is my duty to..."

"Unhand me, woman!" Nick's voice came from behind the door of a box they were passing. She would recognise his deep sound anywhere. "Mmmmm, let me gmmmmm!"

Joseph pulled open the door to reveal Nick and a woman struggling with each other, her lips plastered over his and her hand on his breeches, over his male parts. Joseph looked over his shoulder at Gabriella then shut the door quickly. Angry, hissed words were all Gabriella could hear from behind the door. She could feel the heat of a blush creeping up her cheeks but she swallowed hard and determined not to show any signs of emotion.

"Oh, dear. Well, it does seem as if Lord Eastden is pre-empting your vows with Miss Wainwright," Joseph drawled. "Look, Gabs, tell me you want out of this engagement and I will go in there and tell him you want nothing more to do with him. I shall take you home to the townhouse and tomorrow you'll be back at Thornwich sorting out my ledgers. The scandal will die down by... oh, around 1850, I should think."

"Thank you, Joseph," said Gabriella, turning towards the door of the box as it opened. Clearly the box had been empty and Miss Wainwright and Nick had been hiding behind the heavy curtain which excluded the draughts.

Nick tugged on his waistcoat and smiled slightly at Gabriella.

"Would you like me to accompany you back to my parents, Lady Gabriella?" His cheeks were scarlet but his eyes were dark with pent-up anger.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "Goodbye, Joseph."

Gabriella turned and accepted Nick's outstretched arm, placing her fingers delicately on his sleeve before walking away. Her blood was boiling, but not with Nick and instead with her scheming idiot of a brother. Sadly, Nick was going to have to be collateral damage at least for the next few hours. She forced her face to look impassive and hated the tension she could feel along her betrothed's arm. Her heart

went out to him but she could apologise later.



Devil take it! What on earth had he been thinking? He should have known Miss Abigail Wainwright would be up to no good. She had accosted him as he had hurried to get lemonade for Gabriella, telling him that Lord Thornwich needed to speak to him urgently. He had followed her into the box and she had pounced. He had tried to disentangle himself gently at first but that had been his second mistake. Being a gentleman with the likes of Miss Wainwright was a fool's errand, for she was no lady.

Just as he had decided he needed to be a little rougher to extricate himself from her grasp, the door had opened and Thornwich had been grinning at him. Joseph had then checked that his sister had seen the full horror of the encounter and closed the door.

He had been set up.

"Gabriella," he started but she raised her free hand in a gesture that suggested she did not want to hear excuses. "Please, Gabriella." With her head held high, she made the same gesture again. Perhaps it was best to let her be for now.

They resumed their seats just as the performance was starting again.

At the end of Act Two, Nick was in a terrible state. He had gone over and over the wording of every apology he could think of, every excuse he could make for his downright stupidity and every promise he could make to Gabriella to assure him of his desire to be a faithful husband.

When the curtain lowered this time, Nick's father offered to get the ladies drinks and Lady Chetfern excused herself.

"Gabriella," he said quietly, "that looked very bad but I assure you I was tricked into joining Miss Wainwright in that box. She grabbed me and I tried to be a gentleman and ease myself away from her gently but then you came in and..."

"Nick, please, I beg of you. Speak of it no more for now. Come back to your parents' townhouse after the performance and we will discuss it then."

"No one else is in the box and I need you to understand what was going on."

"Oh Nick, I know very well what was going on. Now here is your

father. Keep the hangdog expression. It is working well.”

Nick frowned at his betrothed. Keep the hangdog expression? It is working well? What in blazes did she mean?

This was going to be a terminable few hours.



Nick followed his betrothed into the blue drawing room of his parents' townhouse, a knot of dread in his stomach. Surely she would at least hear him out and allow him to share his side of the story.

Gabriella turned and gave his mother a reassuring smile. He glanced round to see his mother nod and indicate the doors. Of course they would leave the doors open. Moments later he heard the door to his mother's morning room open. He waited. Gabriella took a seat on a chaise near the fire and indicated he should sit opposite from her.

“Before we start, I owe you an apology,” Gabriella said quietly. Nick was sure his eyebrows had just met his hairline he was so astonished. Why would she think she owed him an apology? “I felt it important you look as uncomfortable and worried about my reaction to the... predicament in which we found you... as possible.”

“Gabriella, I assure you...” But she held her hand up to halt his words again. Frustration was beginning to get the better of him. He huffed out a breath, further annoyed by the fact he suspected he had not made a sound like that since before going to Eton.

“My brother seems to think I am an imbecile. I don't know if he believes this mark on my cheek is a sign that my brain does not work properly, but he has always treated me like a halfwit. I know that you were set up but I did not want him to know his ploy had not worked out.”

“You knew?” A mixture of relief and irritation washed over him. He'd been at that theatre for four hours contemplating his fate, wishing he too could have died at the hands of Brutus, only for her to tell him that she knew he had been set up.

“Of course I knew. No one organises a secret tryst at the theatre. It's far too open and public. Anyway, even if you were having an affair, you are far too much of a gentleman to be caught in a compromising situation with your mistress. You would have a house for her and you would bed her there and you would make sure you did your best to keep it a secret from me.”

He sighed. “I would not have a mistress. Gabby, I want our

marriage to work. I have no interest in the Miss Wainwrights of this world. She offers every man her favours and though few resist her, she is not respected by them.”

“Perhaps Joseph would have got away with it if he had not used his own mistress in his plan. That was rather stupid of him,” she mused almost to herself.

“You knew she was his mistress.”

Gabriella rolled her eyes. “The whole of the *ton* know Miss Wainwright is his mistress. Even Edna knows.” He nodded. “Has she ever been your mistress?”

Her question seemed to hit him in the chest. Like a cricket ball coming in from a fielder that one had not anticipated.

“Not as such.”

“Not as such?”

“We did...” he made a rolling motion with his hand. “About three years ago. One night. I... well, I was a little foxed and well... men have needs.”

She nodded. “I should not have asked. It is bad manners. It just slipped out.”

Her comment made him feel no better. He should have lied. But then, what if Miss Wainwright decided to tell Gabriella of their night together just to spite him? Oh, he knew Miss Wainwright was free with her body in the hope of snaring a husband—some man who would be so besotted with her that he would offer her marriage despite her dreadful reputation.

“Gabriella, I have no real excuses. I wanted a woman that night and she made herself available to me. I promise I will be faithful to our marriage vows. I have no idea how well we shall suit when the time comes but we are both sensible people. I believe we can rub along fine together. I am attracted to you and the kiss we shared outside your bedchamber suggests you are attracted to me. I can’t rewrite the past or change the mistakes I have made. Hell, Miss Wainwright is far from the worst mistake I have made.” Gabriella’s eyebrow rose at his bad language and he felt the blush creep up his cheeks. “My apologies.”

“No, please. Nicholas, listen to me. I care not about Miss Wainwright. Perhaps there may always be a sliver of jealousy that I hold for any woman who was in your bed before I was, but I suspect that is normal. I just believe you could do better than me but the announcement has been made and it seems you are stuck with me.”

“I cannot think of anyone I would prefer to be stuck with.” He dropped to his knees and moved over the rug towards her. He raised a hand and cupped her cheek and she leaned into his touch. His hand was on her birthmark, and for the first time she did not seem

embarrassed by it. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers.

She opened slightly for him and he moved his lips, coaxing her to follow his lead. She did. One of her gloved hands slid onto his shoulder then around his neck and curled into his hair. He moved his hand around to guide her head, heedless to the sound of one of her hairpins dropping to the floor. She opened her mouth and just as he moved his tongue to plunge it into her mouth, a delicate cough from the door of the drawing room brought him to his senses. Thank heavens he was only partially aroused.

He withdrew his hand slowly, trying to catch a glimpse of Gabriella's face. Her cheeks burned red and her own grasp on his hair loosened. She pulled her hand down to her lap before looking up at him, biting her lip in a most seductive way.

"Goodnight, Nick," she said quietly.

"Goodnight, Gabby," he replied, standing to face his mother, his hands clasped in front of his groin just in case she could see any final remnants of his arousal.

Her eyes glinted and she obviously was struggling not to laugh. "Brook Street awaits you, son," the countess said as he dropped a kiss to her cheek.

"Not for long," he replied, throwing one last look over his shoulder at the woman he couldn't wait to marry. He trotted down the steps of the townhouse a whistle on his lips. Gabriella was a wonderful woman, so clever and quick. Not every woman would have understood what was happening at the theatre, but she had. She'd proved herself faithful and able to control herself in every situation. She's sneaked further into his heart this evening. Damn her. He may very well be falling for her.

Chapter 20

Gabriella placed her gloved fingers on her lips and sighed. Why had she asked such a stupid question? She knew it was not well done of her to ask her betrothed about former lovers, and Nick was too honest for his own good.

Of course, that was exactly the reason she had not told him in the theatre that she had realised immediately her brother had set him up. He would have given the game away and she could not help feeling the more Joseph thought her match was a poor one, the less trouble he would cause. She knew he could not afford to lose the wager so he would do all in his power to prevent the match. He also knew she was strong-willed and would rather remain a spinster than marry someone who would be unfaithful.

"I think it is time for bed, my dear," said the countess from the doorway, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yes, of course." Did Nick's mother think her a light-skirt that she had been willing to kiss her son, at night, in the drawing room? The older woman smiled at her and placed an arm around her shoulder as she led her to the stairs.

"I think we should have a talk in the morning," said Lady Chetfern. Gabriella shot a worried gaze at her and the countess chuckled.

"Oh my dear, I am not angry, nor do I think any less of you for kissing Nick. I stole a few kisses from his father before we wed. I think I need to have the mother-daughter talk with you. No offence to Lady Thornwich but I assume she has not discussed the wedding night with you."

Heat rose in Gabriella's cheeks but she forced herself to look at the older woman as she shook her head.

"No, and although I have the general idea, it would be nice to have a few things... clarified."

"I thought so. I am not easily shocked, Gabriella, so tomorrow feel free to ask me anything you wish. I would have appreciated some

candid advice before I married the earl. Now, sleep well and I shall see you at breakfast. I think another trip to the shops will be in order, followed by an ice at Gunther's."

Gabriella smiled. It didn't matter how old she got, a trip to Gunther's for an ice was always the highlight of a visit to the town, and considering how hot she was after Nick had kissed her, something cool and refreshing would not go amiss.



A loud rattle on the front door made Gabriella jump. Who knew sound could travel so far in a big townhouse like that owned by the Chetferns? But then her bedchamber was directly above the front door. Molly, her maid, had just finished brushing out her hair and was in the process of braiding it before she slipped under the welcome covers of her bed. She was tired from this evening's events.

"What the devil is going on?" came the grumbling tones of the earl.

"Lord Eastden." It was the butler's voice. "What happened?"

Gabriella did not wait to hear any more. She shoved her arms into her dressing gown and was heading out the door of her bedchamber before she had even finished tying it. The butler's voice had been full of concern.

"I found him, just around the corner." She leaned over the bannister and saw a well-dressed gentleman in a greatcoat and top hat, his arm around Nick's waist, helping him down the hall. She followed the earl downstairs. In the pale candlelight she could see the top of Nick's head shining with liquid. Despite his dark hair masking what the liquid was, Gabriella knew it was blood.

But she had no time to be squeamish. The earl had reached Nick.

"I think he was attacked. Footpads most likely," said the young man helping Nick. "I was walking home from White's... that's how I know him, and he was slumped against a railing. I nearly walked by, thinking he was a drunk servant till I spotted his cane. I knew it was a fine cane, not something a ruffian or a servant would own. I bent down and I saw it was Eastden. I just brought him here hoping someone would be home."

"Good idea. You're the younger son of Swain, are you not?"

"Aye, sir."

"Thank you for bringing him home. I shall help him up to his

room. Please excuse my manners, I would offer you a drink but..."

"No! Please, my lord, I need no thanks. I was just glad I was passing." The young man made a quick bow and turned to leave.

The butler and the earl took an arm each and began to help Nick up the stairs. He was muttering incoherently. At least a good thing that he was somewhat conscious. Gabriella hurried up the stairs ahead of the men, encouraging a distraught Lady Chetfern up with her so she would not hamper the men's progress.

"Which room?" Gabriella asked. Lady Chetfern pointed to one across the hall from Gabriella's. She hurried in and was glad to see that Molly had beaten her to it and had already pulled down the sheets and counterpane. The men laid Nick down on the bed and backed away to look at the damage.

Apart from the blood running down his cheek from the head wound and a red mark on his jaw which would likely be a bruise within a few hours, she could see no real signs of damage. Though that was not to say he had not been hurt. She pulled back his greatcoat and coat, relieved to see no signs of a stab wound.

"Nick, where does it hurt?"

"Head and knee," he groaned.

"Which knee?" She placed a hand on his left knee and he howled in pain.

"I'll take that as an answer," she said as much to herself as to anyone else. She raised herself onto tiptoes to look down at his head wound. The blood was congealed, which meant the wound had likely stopped bleeding and was therefore not particularly bad, especially since head wounds tended to bleed like the very devil.

She turned to the earl and the butler. "I think his head wound is small. I suspect it only needs cleaned up. I need to inspect his knee but for the sake of propriety I should get dressed. I can take care of him, but you need to check his body for any other injuries. Check his back, his chest and stomach and his thighs. Remove his clothes down to just his breeches and shirt. His stockings need to go too. Molly, bring up water and cloths. Lady Chetfern, I know it is not the done thing but can you help me into my gown while Molly goes down for the water?"

"Yes, of course dear," said the countess, shaking her head as if coming out of a trance. Tears streaked her cheeks and her hands shook. Gabriella guided her out of the room and across the hall. Within minutes, Gabriella was looking respectable in a yellow day dress. She had managed it largely without the help of Lady Chetfern who had sat on the bed, wringing her hands and gazing worriedly at the door despite Gabriella's assurances that Nick would be fine.

Her stays were far from tight enough, but she did not have time to wait for her maid. She grabbed a fishu from a drawer, tucked it into

her not so well-covered décolletage and walked out the door.

She arrived back in the room and her heart almost stopped. Nick was propped up in bed, his shirt open, showing part of his chest with a smattering of springy black hair. His legs were bare to the knee too and her belly seemed to go warm suddenly. What was happening to her?

"He has a few nasty red marks on his torso which I imagine will turn into bruises but nothing seems broken. His knee is pretty swollen and I suspect you are right about the head wound," declared the earl. "Do you think this is proper for you to tend him?"

Gabriella shrugged. "If it is inappropriate, feel free to force us to marry on Christmas Eve." The earl barked out a laugh. "I have helped our housekeeper tend the wounds of many men who work the estate. I married none of them. Stay if you feel it appropriate, but I have Molly. Besides, he looks in no state to ravish me. Would you not agree? He is pretty battered but he shall be fine. I have no doubt about it."

The earl smiled at this. "I shall go and force my countess to drink some brandy for her nerves. I'll send up some laudanum for my son."

"No laudanum," came a loud grunt from the bed. Both Gabriella and the earl turned to Nick. His eyes seemed to blaze with fire for a moment. "Please. No laudanum." Gabriella swallowed hard and nodded.

"Fine. We will not give you laudanum unless you ask for it."

"Good."

"It's odd," said the earl gazing at his son, his mouth twisting. The older man then pointed at a money purse sitting on the bedside table. "The footpads never robbed him."

"Not footpads," declared Nick scowling. "They were gentlemen."

"Joseph?" asked Gabriella, her heart pounding.

"I didn't see. The cowards hit me from behind."

"How do you know they were gentlemen?"

Nick rubbed his side.

"Believe me, I know a well-made pair of hessians when they are kicking me in the ribs."

"Oh!"

"Plus, they had refined accents. They were no street urchins."

"I see. Well, let us put you to rights, my lord. Perhaps we can worry about who did this once you are not staining the pillows with the blood on your head."

Nick grimaced.

"I believe you are correct, Gabriella, and you are properly chaperoned if your maid is here. Carry on." The earl guided his wife out of the bedchamber and presumably to the nearest brandy decanter.



“Gah!” Nick roared as Gabriella lifted his knee gently,

holding it until her maid placed a pillow under it and then let it down slowly. The pain was so intense it made him want to cast up his accounts there and then, but he would not show himself up in front of her.

“I am sorry,” she whispered, “but it does need to be elevated.” She placed cold, wet cloths over the knee he was sure was twice the size it was supposed to be.

“Shall I take the dirty water down to the kitchen, my lady?” asked the maid, scowling into the large bowl of water he assumed to be somewhat bloody given the state of his head.

“Yes please, Molly. I shall use the bowl on the side there but please bring up some more cold water.”

“Yes, my lady.” Molly bobbed a curtsy as Gabriella placed a hand on either side of his face and pushed his face into her bosom so she could inspect the wound at the crown of his head. His body reacted instantly. The poor girl was clearly not thinking about the situation she was currently in as she ran a damp cloth over the head wound.

He sucked in a breath at a sharp sting and placed his hands on her waist. It wasn’t that the head wound itself was sore, but he was already nauseated from the pain in his knee.

Damn, she had luscious breasts. Every part of his being, and one part in particular, wanted him to stick out his tongue and lick the skin just under his lips. Thank heavens for the fishu. It seemed to taunt him and remind him of his need to be honourable at this moment. Meanwhile the throbbing in his knee reminded him he could hardly tumble the girl even if he wanted to. And the new ache in his groin told him he desperately wanted to.

“It has nearly stopped bleeding,” she remarked as another sting made him suck in a breath, filled with her scent of lavender. Involuntarily his hands moved higher. His manhood was straining at the fall of his breeches and she still had no idea what kind of predicament she was in.

He brushed the knuckles of his thumbs along the underside of her breast and she gasped. Whether it was a gasp of pleasure or one of outrage, he was not sure. He moved his thumbs again.

“My lord,” her voice was husky.

More desire than protest then.

He smiled against her décolletage and pursed his lips, dropping a kiss to the one bit of spare skin her fischu did not cover. She stepped away, biting her lip. "My lord, that is wholly inappropriate," she said, the censure in her voice somewhat lacking.

"Did you like it though, Gabby?" he asked.

Her throat worked as she swallowed and looked anywhere but at him. "My lord, we are not yet married."

"No, we are not. But I asked if you liked it. Did you?"

Her cheeks were crimson, almost hiding the strawberry birthmark. She nodded slowly.

"Me too." He grinned.

"My lord!" she chastised.

"Oh don't 'my lord' me, Gabby. You were the one who stuck my face in your bosom. I just... took advantage of it."

"I did and I am sorry."

"I am not sorry. It took my mind off the pain in this blasted knee."

"Well, I am afraid my bosom will no longer be acting as a distraction for you, Nicholas."

"Oh my darling Gabby, even from here it is a delightful distraction."



Gabriella knew she should go to bed. He could easily ring for a servant if he needed anything. He may be in pain but he was in no danger. But somehow she could not bring herself to leave his side. Molly snorted as she made herself more comfortable on the leather seat next to the hearth and her gentle snoring continued.

She looked around the masculine bedchamber, decorated in a dark blue and gold. Her gaze fell on the small desk, clear of everything but a pot of ink and a quill in its holder before gazing at the landscape above the fireplace. It looked like Chetfern estate but the building was ancient. She presumed it was the old abbey. Her attention then turned to rows upon rows of tin soldiers sitting on a table top, placed as if they were about to wage war on each other. How long had they been here? How long had he kept them? She could see some of them were very old-fashioned in their garments. A few reminded her of pictures she had seen from the time of Henry VIII or Queen Elizabeth.

"I collect them. Some are very old." The croaky voice from the bed made her jump and she placed her hand on her chest, feeling her

heart pounding.

"Do you still play with them?" she retaliated a moment later.

"No, though I will pass them to my son when we have one." His last words were a low promise. *When we have one.* Of course she knew her purpose was to bear him children, but she really had not thought much further than the wedding and perhaps their first night as man and wife. She turned to look at him and he grinned. "I hate to be a bother but is there anything to drink?"

"I have lemonade, water or brandy. Your father brought in the brandy after he had calmed your mother down."

"Did she have a fit of the vapours?" he asked.

"No. She was just upset. No one likes to see their baby hurt."

"I am hardly a baby."

"I believe you will always be your mother's baby. She was shaken and upset. She could not even tie the..." She stopped and turned away from him. What was she doing? She had nearly mentioned her stays to Lord Eastden.

"She couldn't even what, Gabby? What could she not tie?"

"Nothing. She is fine now."

"Are you sure?" He tried to pull himself up on the bed but grimaced.

"Yes, I am. Nick. Lie down or you will hurt yourself."

"I feel like I have been run over by a coach and six."

"More like a bunch of bullies led by my brother."

"Now, Gabby, we do not know it was Thornwich."

"Perhaps not but... Nick, what are you doing?"

Nick had pulled his shirt free from his breeches and was baring his stomach to her, inspecting the purpling bruises on his belly and around his rib cage. He touched two fingers to the one just under his sternum and grimaced.

"Don't scold me, Gabby. I have a right to see what state they have left me in and you shall see me fully naked soon enough."

"Yes, but..."

"Ow!" he was inspecting another bruise on his side. Now was not the time to be prissy.

"Here, I have some salve. It should help." She leaned over and picked up the small jar. Taking a fingerful of the gooey substance, Gabriella touched some to the bruise on his far side. He sucked in his breath through his teeth and she murmured an apology, but she worked the salve into his skin, noticing his muscles relax as the pain eased.

"Oh, that is nice," he murmured. "What is in it?"

"Chilli peppers from South America."

"Chilli peppers?"

“Yes. They reduce the amount of pain. I think it’s because they heat up the skin. An apothecary gave some to my mother when I broke my arm when I was ten. She always kept a jar of it handy and I do too. I hardly ever use it except on the workmen on the estate.” She took another dollop of salve and worked on the bruise just to the right of his navel. He winced again, but this time his muscles relaxed more quickly.

“You minister to the workmen on your brother’s estate in this manner?” She looked up into his scowling gaze.

“I have never ministered to a man who has been kicked repeatedly on the torso before. Usually it is leg, arm or face and head injuries. Yours is the first male torso I have ever touched.”

“Mmm!” He threw his head back against the pillow. “I wish you had not said that. I cannot believe I still have to wait nine days until I can haul you astride me and watch you ride yourself to oblivion.” A smile tipped the corners of his mouth and although she had no idea what he meant about riding him to oblivion, she knew he was talking about the marital bed. She could not ask the countess about it tomorrow. It sounded very personal and she was absolutely convinced that Nick would be patient and kind to her and not expect much of her in the beginning.

He opened his eyes and gazed at her, his brow crinkling. “Oh God, what did I just say? I said that out loud, did I not?”

She nodded.

He groaned, dropping his head back on the pillow and covering his eyes with his hand. “I’m sorry, Gabby. The pain in my knee is excruciating and I’m trying my hardest to keep my mind off it. I spoke without thinking and I have offended you. Please accept my humblest apology.”

“There is no need. I am not offended. A little surprised and confused as to what you mean but not offended.”

He raised a hand, stroking the back of his knuckles down her cheek—that cheek. The one she had hated since she was old enough to understand the large red mark was not normal—that it set her apart from other little girls. She shuddered, unable to stop the reaction to his gentle caress. She was terribly attracted to this man and her body craved something that she did not understand, but she would not dare to believe he found her attractive despite the lovely words he spoke.

She turned back to the jar of salve, intent on finishing her task and disappearing back to her own bedchamber before she acted on the desire to press her lips to that bruise forming below his sternum. What would the skin on his torso feel like against her lips? For that matter, did people even kiss parts of the body that were not the lips and hands? She licked her own lips. Nine more days and she would know.



He was in agony, and not just in his knee, head and torso. The expressions fleeting across her face made him grow harder, and then her pink tongue peeked out from her mouth and moistened her lips. He was almost undone.

Her mouth changed into a hard line as she set about completing her task of rubbing salve into his bruises. He had to admit that the chilli pepper concoction was helping, as was the view down her cleavage when she leaned down to rub the medicinal concoction around his hip which, until that moment, he had not realised was sore. Her hand worked, skimming the waistline of his breeches. He bit back a moan of pleasure as she unknowingly let her hand stray rather too near the part of his body that was most impressed by her touch.

He placed his hand over his straining erection. Better that she nudge his arm than anything else, both for his sake and hers.

“Are you nearly finished?” he rasped, praying to God in heaven that this beautiful torment would be over soon.

“Yes.” She placed the lid on the jar, wiped her hands on a linen, before leaning over him to check his wound. Devil take it. She was temptation incarnate and those breasts were dangerously close to his face again. As for her earlier comment about his mother and tying something... it had been the laces of her stays that had not been tied properly because those breasts were almost in their natural state and they were glorious.

He closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

“I’m going to bed now. Is there anything more you need before I retire? The bell cord is here by your side.”

A kiss goodnight.

Instead he lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. She smiled shyly at him then pulled her hand away and moved to wake her maid.

Nine more days and she would be his. He doubted he had anticipated bedding a woman like this since he had been a virgin.

Chapter 21

It had been a very long week. Nick had been frustrated by his knee, by the bruises around his ribcage, by the beautiful creature who had tended him in the first couple of days after his beating and by the slow passage of time until their wedding. He had hobbled into the Archbishop of Canterbury's office and attained the special licence so he and Lady Gabriella could marry on Christmas Eve. Now the organisation of the big day was out of the way, he was champing at the bit to have it out of the way so he and Gabriella could be together—properly.

He had agreed to spend Christmas at Chetfern, despite his desire to take his new bride back to the Eastden Estate, twenty miles east of his family seat. His mother had conceded and allowed him to open up the dower house for their wedding night and for Christmas night so they could have proper privacy. When he made Gabriella scream in pleasure, he had no desire to be worrying whether his parents could hear her.

He straightened his leg in front of the fire, pleased to note that instead of searing pain, there was just a dull ache at the movement. He glanced morosely at the book in his hands. It was a good enough book but he was bored.

Where the devil was Gabriella?

As if by magic, she appeared in the doorway of the drawing room, her eyes bright with excitement, her breathing laboured as if she had been hurrying.

"Nick, does your knee still hurt terribly?" she asked, curling her fingers into her skirts, lifting them slightly and giving him a lovely view of her ankles. He raised his reluctant gaze to her face.

"Not terribly. It still pains me a little and I am reliant on that damned cane." She blanched at his curse. "I apologise. I wish to be outside instead of stuck in this armchair."

"The servants are going into the woods to find evergreens to

decorate the house. I wondered..." She stopped and bit her lip. "Are you able to come and help?"

A walk! It was just the thing. And he knew exactly which part of the woods to take her.

"I would love to," he said, pulling himself to his feet and grabbing his cane. Pain shot through his knee but he willed it away. It would ease as he walked. He stopped at the sideboard, poured himself small measure of brandy and threw it back. He was all for being manly, but a little alcohol to numb the pain never went amiss.

"Are you sure?" she asked, placing a hand on his arm, a frown marring her brow.

"I should love to accompany you and the walk shall do my knee good."

"I shall go and put on my pelisse, gloves and bonnet and meet you at the front door in a few minutes." She turned and hurried up the stairs, her hips swaying the pink muslin of her day dress. He caught a glimpse of her ankles as she climbed the stairs. His blood heated.

Two days.



Nick stumbled slightly and Gabriella stuck out a hand to steady

him. She was not entirely sure this had been a sensible idea. He was clearly still in some pain but he was a man and therefore he was stubborn.

"We can go back," she hissed, looking around her to check there were no servants to hear her concession to his painful knee. She knew he would rather die than appear weak. Why were men like that? It defied explanation.

"No. I stumbled over a blasted tree root. I am fine. Only a short way until we find the mistletoe. I know where it is."

"Mistletoe." It was not as cold today as it had been and heat flamed her cheeks. "Is it proper to have mistletoe in the house?"

"We have always had mistletoe in the house at Christmas. I just never had anyone to kiss under it before... not properly." His voice was low and husky and contained a wicked promise that seemed to cause a tension just below her belly. Over the past week, he had stolen the odd chaste kiss from her, but she could tell from the way his gaze lingered on her body that he wished for more. She may be innocent, but she was not stupid.

"I see. We never had it. Well, I don't think so. Certainly since mother and father died we have not really celebrated Christmas."

"Not at all?"

"Oh well, Joseph usually gives me a book on animal husbandry or estate finance or crop rotation as a gift and we do have goose for dinner that day. But we never decorate the manor."

"Why does he give you such books?"

"Because I run the estate, for the most part."

"Ah yes, you said as much the morning you were dealing with the thatcher."

"Yes. If I did not take charge, I doubt anything would be done. Joseph refuses to pay a man of business or a land steward."

"And what will happen when we marry?"

She shrugged.

"I must confess it is the one biggest fear and regret I have about marrying you. I like you very much and I believe you are right that we will deal well together. However, I worry about my friends at Thornwich and what will become of them. I would have suggested we ride over there sometime this week but I was worried about your bruising. I don't imagine riding a horse would be particularly comfortable for you right now."

It was true. She was worried about the housekeeper and the butler and the tenants and the stable hands and everyone else associated with the estate. She suspected Joseph had no money whatsoever.

"No, it would not. Though I suspect in a few days it will be fine."

"Good. Perhaps we could..." She looked up at him, her eyes wide. He would have... expectations of her during the few days after their wedding. "Oh I apologise, my lord. Of course we shall be married, we cannot just..."

He chuckled.

"Gabriella, while the thought of keeping you nestled in my arms and in my bed for the foreseeable future is tempting, there are only so many times in a day a couple can make love. We shall be able to join my parents for Christmas dinner and possibly even cards afterwards. We may even make it to Christmas morning service if you desperately want to go. And we can visit your brother too."

"Oh!" In truth, she had not really considered what life was like for a newly married lady on the days just after her wedding.

He stopped suddenly. "Ah, here we are." He pointed to a branch just a bit higher than his head on which the parasitic plant had attached itself. "There is always a lot of mistletoe around here." He reached up and pulled on the branch, broke off a few sprigs and handed them to her. She accepted them. "Gabriella, do you understand what will happen on the night of our wedding? Someone

has explained, have they not?"

"Your mother explained. She asked if I had any questions."

He turned from his task and raised an eyebrow. "And did you?"

She looked at him, shame burning inside her. Of course she had questions, lots of them. How big was his 'rod'—the word used by his mother to describe his anatomy? How could he hold himself up and move in her the way it had been described? The more she thought on the act the more confused she got. Would they be naked or would she still have her nightrail on?

She nodded mutely.

"Gabriella, I don't want you coming to our marriage bed afraid and confused. I would rather we were both embarrassed now and we talk frankly. It may not be proper, but I care more for your ease than I do for propriety."

She looked into his hazel eyes and smiled. He really was the best of men and did have her interests at heart.

"I may be a little confused, Nick, but I am not afraid. I trust you and I have faith that our first night together will be everything either of us would want it to be."

He let the branch of the old oak spring back into place then turned, one sprig in his hand which he raised aloft. As he advanced on her, she backed up against the tree trunk, slightly in awe of the wolfish gleam in his eye.

She swallowed hard. He did not have the intention of just a chaste peck. Of that she had no doubt. Her heart beat faster. Inside her kidskin gloves her palms moistened.

He moved closer still, dropping his cane and catching her around the waist.

"Do you trust me enough to let me kiss you thoroughly, Lady Gabriella?"

"I do, Lord Eastden."

He threw his hat to the ground then loosened the ribbons of her bonnet, tossing that atop the blanket of fallen leaves too. Then he pressed a kiss to her jawline, and she leaned her head back onto the bark of the tree. He kissed down the column of her neck and she sighed, easing her hips against him in a most wanton fashion. His lips met the fur collar of her pelisse. He moved them back up to her chin, then he captured her lips.

That was the moment Gabriella surrendered.



Emotion welled in him as he became aware of her surrender. No

one had ever trusted him in this way before. Here they were alone in the woods and he could easily ravish her.

Of course he knew he would never do that. It would be unconscionable. Ravishing an innocent in the woods in December two days before her wedding? It didn't bear thinking about—even if he was her bridegroom. But she did not know that.

Or did she?

As he plunged his tongue into her mouth, she tweaked the buttons of his greatcoat and wrapped her arms around him inside the warmth of the woollen fabric. For all the layers of clothing between them, he felt closer to her as he explored her mouth, her tongue and her lips. She explored his mouth too. One of his hands tangled in her coif as the other moved lower to cup her pert bottom.

With each stroke of his tongue, her hips moved and when she moaned into his mouth, he cared naught that she was an innocent. She was a passionate woman and she was going to make an excellent bed partner. And she seemed to have a curiosity about her own pleasure which he had never found among the innocents he had kissed in the past. She arched, rocked against him, explored him. Did she explore herself in the darkness of her bedchamber? Now there was a thought that made his hard length throb with excitement.

Her hand was on his arse, kneading, drawing him closer still. Christ, there was every possibility this woman would kill him with her ardour. But he would die a happy man.

He pulled up her skirts, just enough to ease her movements as he pressed his good knee between her thighs. She moaned again and he lifted her fully onto his thigh, very much aware that her hip was stroking his hard length through his breeches. It was heavenly.

He continued to kiss her as their surroundings disappeared from his awareness. For now there was just her and him. Two lovers finding pleasure in each other.

There was every chance he was going to disgrace himself, but somehow, he didn't care. The woman he cared for was finding her own pleasure and he intended to help her. He deepened the kiss, stroking her tongue and the inside of her cheek as he fiddled with the buttons of her fur-lined pelisse. All the while she rubbed her hot, needy flesh up and down his buckskin-clad thigh, looking forward to the day when his fingers would dance though that flesh—when he could touch it for real. But not now.

When he gained access, he cupped her breast. Three more layers of

clothing lay between him and these treasures but he would not bare flesh. Not today. He would not have her half-dressed out in the cold. But he did find her pebbled nipple through her clothing and brushed his thumb firmly over it.

Her groan was one of pleasure mixed with confusion and she ripped her mouth from his, resting her forehead in the crook of his neck, her hips still beating out their rhythm against his thigh and against his self-control.

"Nick, what's happening?" she gasped before an almost pained moan escaped her lips. He tightened his grip on her backside, urging her on, nearly delirious with the pleasure she was giving to him. He was so close.

"You're nearly at oblivion, my love. It's completely natural and beautiful. Keep going."

"I... I don't want to stop. But it seems..." she ground out.

"Don't stop," he urged, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. He couldn't bear it if she stopped now through panic at the strange sensations.

Her hip movements had become more intent and he pressed his thigh harder against her. His injured knee was now screaming with pain but he would not let her stop. If he could give her this—the knowledge of her own body's needs before their wedding night, then the pain of the consummation for her would hopefully be fleeting.

He felt his own body tighten as she changed her stroke, determined, needy and desperate.

He gritted his teeth as he spilled into his breeches, trying to mask his grunt of satisfaction. This was about Gabriella, not him and his pleasure. But it was a welcome release nonetheless and probably the only accident of this sort in his life that held no shame... only joy and desire.

And then it happened.

A high keening sound, the tightening of her muscles, the painful gripping of her thighs around his and then a slow shuddering as she gasped for breath. He moved his hands up, one on her shoulders to steady her and one on the small of her back, soothing in small circles as her climax peaked then faded.

They stood for long moments as they caught their breaths. He had a sticky mess inside his breeches and he could not have been happier about it. She gasped against his waistcoat, her face buried under two layers of wool.

Gabriella drew in a deep breath and lifted her head, her brown eyes meeting his gaze.

"Do you think me very wanton?" she asked, confusion, pleasure and concern warring in their chocolate depths. Something sparkled on

her cheek. Oh God, it must be a tear. She was crying and he was the scoundrel who had caused it.

"No, my love. I encouraged it. I wanted to see you come apart in my arms. I wanted you to know at least some of the pleasure that can happen in the marriage bed without you having your innocence taken before your wedding day. Please don't cry."

She blinked then scowled. Her gaze moved to his shoulders and up to the sky.

"It's snowing!" she cried out, her voice full of wonder and childish glee—a marked contrast to the siren who had come apart in his arms a few moments before.

He grinned at her. "That is all you have to say?"

She turned her attention back to him and returned his grin. "If you do not think me a wanton, what else is there to say? Except thank you, of course."

"You are most welcome."

"Will that happen every time we are intimate?" She bit her lip shyly. He wanted to laugh. Her skirts were hitched up to her knee, her most intimate part was still pressed against his muscular thigh and she was still flushed from what he presumed was her first ever orgasm. But she had become shy all of a sudden.

"If I am a good husband, you should."

She climbed off his thigh, adjusted her skirts and rebuttoned her pelisse. "Then I shall expect it."

He bit his own lip to stop the bark of laughter. He loved this damned chit.

Loved?

As he picked up his walking cane, she gathered the discarded mistletoe before they re-donned their headwear and linked arms. Their embrace had left his knee stiff and sore and he hobbled slightly.

"Have you hurt your knee?"

"It's fine."

"I heard you grunt in pain just before I..." She made a motion with her hand showing she was not sure how to express what had happened to her.

"It wasn't pain." Why he was telling her, he did not know but she deserved the truth. "It was pleasure. Just before you..." he mimicked her motion "...I did too."

"Oh!" Despite the delightful colour in her cheeks, he was even more delighted by the triumphant smile that tugged her lips. Gabriella was at last seeing just how much she could entice a man. Perhaps he was beginning to undo some of the damage his cruel words had inflicted all those years ago.

Chapter 22

Nick walked into the breakfast room the next morning, a wide grin on his face. Tomorrow would be his wedding day and he could honestly not see what the fuss was about. The idea of spending the rest of his life with Gabriella did not feel at all like a leg shackle. He could not wait to get her luscious curves into his bed.

His breath hitched as he stopped just inside the doorway to the room, the crackling fire making the place far too hot and a vision of loveliness standing staring morosely out the window. He approached her. Glancing around to check that no servants were hovering and pleased to see the room empty, he caught the tops of her arms and placed a gentle kiss just where her neck and shoulder joined.

“Nick,” she remonstrated just as she moved her head to give him the access he needed to nuzzle up her neck and drop a kiss behind her ear.

“I know, but what are they going to do? Make us marry?” She smiled at his use of her argument.

“For someone about to marry a handsome fellow like me, you look rather despondent,” he teased. She heaved a sigh and pointed out the window.

“The snow came to naught really.” He looked at the light dusting of snow, not even enough to fully cover the lawn and the paths were their usual brown muddy state.

“Ah, but look at the leaden sky, my love. I have every faith that you will be tramping through the snow to say your vows. I’m so glad you agreed to have the wedding here in the chapel after all. A few friends are arriving from London today and your brother and sister-in-law have been invited. I just hope everyone arrives before the snow gets too bad.”

As if on cue a few large snowflakes fluttered to the ground and she shivered against him. He pulled her shawl up over her shoulders and stepped away. She turned, expectant. He melted. Dropping his head,

he placed a soft, lingering but chaste kiss on her lips.

“Stop tempting me, you beautiful, wonderful woman.” Her lips curved into a smile and she moved her hand as if she was about to cover her birthmark but then lowered it.

“We should get breakfast before it gets cold,” she said simply. He nodded and followed her to where the food lay, lifting a plate to help serve her before serving himself.



“My lord, The Earl of Thornwich is here to see you. He is in

the study. I suggested he come in here but he said he wanted to speak to you in your father’s study.”

“Really? Fine.”

Gabriella looked from the stern butler to her betrothed and saw a look of puzzlement pass between the men.

“Gabriella, would you like to come?”

“Umm...” she looked at the butler who shrugged almost imperceptibly. “Very well.” She rose and followed Nick.

When they entered the earl’s study she was surprised to find Joseph sitting behind the earl’s desk, his feet up on the furniture. Nick barely seemed to notice.

“Ah, Eastden, you are not the brightest of fellows it seems. I have barely been here two minutes and already I have in my hand on the special licence you procured so you can marry my sister. That was very silly of you. Now all I need to do is drop it in the fire and you lose the wager.”

Nick moved to sit on one of the high-backed chairs at one side on the hearth and motioned to the other for Gabriella. She took a seat, horror building inside her. Her brother was going to ruin her wedding and cause Nick to lose the wager. She looked from the handsome viscount, who lifted one booted leg onto the knee of his other leg, wincing slightly. She tried not to smile. In his attempt at nonchalance he had forgotten the bruising on his knee.

“Is that why you are here, Thornwich? To try and stop the wedding and win the wager?”

“I came to talk sense into you, man. Look at her. Spinster material if ever I saw it. You shall both be miserable.”

“Like you are? Tell me, Thornwich, how much do you pay Miss Wainwright to warm your bed whenever you are in town?”

Gabriella gasped. Of course she knew Miss Wainwright was Joseph's mistress but no one spoke about such things in polite company.

"That is none of your business, Eastden."

"And my impending marriage is none of yours."

"You really want to marry a wench with the mark of the devil on her?" Gabriella's hand flew to her cheek. On many occasions as she had grown up her brother had thrown that cruel taunt in her direction, but no one else had ever heard it. He would sit at the dinner table rubbing his cheek, making little horns with his fingers when their parents were not looking. When she was younger she would rise to the bait and be scolded for making a fuss about nothing. When she got older, she ignored the insults.

"If you mean an insignificant birthmark, then yes. But let me tell you, Thornwich--from this moment on, every nasty jibe you make at your sister's expense will lose you five thousand pounds of the settlement I am about to offer you for your sister's hand."

"Settlement? What the devil are you on about?" Joseph was on his feet, the special licence still in his hand.

"It's simple. I am rich and you... well, you have gambled away your inheritance and no doubt your sister's dowry too." Gabriella looked up and saw the truth of Nick's statement in her brother's eyes. No wonder she had been unable to find a husband on the marriage mart. Some cash poor aristocrats would marry Prinny himself for his money, if such a thing were legal. They would have overlooked her marked skin if her dowry had been intact.

"Gabs, I..."

Gabriella held up a staying hand. She did not want to hear his excuses. Instead she focused on the ruby of Nick's cravat pin and willed herself not to cry.

"Here is the deal. The wager is off, but for the sake of gentlemanly honour I shall marry Gabriella tomorrow and officially win the bet as far as every gentleman in White's and every gossip of the Beau Monde are concerned. I shall not collect my winnings but everyone will assume the debt has been paid."

"I shall give you twenty thousand pounds. Ten thousand to pay off any outstanding debts, wages etcetera and ten thousand to be held in trust for improvements to your estate.

"My man of business and my land steward will arrive on the day after Boxing Day and they will work in your office and on your estate. You will give them every help and they shall turn around the estate, making it profitable again. The ten thousand pounds held in trust is to be used only for estate improvements, buying any animals, tools or whatever is required. Once the estate is in profit again you can keep

on my men and learn from your mistakes or you can send them back to my employ.”

“Why are you doing this? I don’t see what is in it for you.”

“Your sister can rest easy knowing that her brother is not getting further into debt and is not doing anything that is likely to get himself hanged.”

Gabriella made a little yelp of protest but Nick ignored her, rising to his feet and fishing in his coat pocket.

“The night you attacked me I saw you and recognised you. As you tripped me up and I twisted my knee, I heard something tinkle onto the pavement. Once you had gone and before I all but lost consciousness, I searched for what had fallen.” He held up a cravat pin. “It has the Thornwich crest on it.”

Gabriella jumped to her feet.

“Joseph, how could you?” Joseph too was out of his seat and backing up against the window. Gabriella noticed that the small flurry of snow had turned into a veritable blizzard.

Joseph shook his head. “I had no choice. I never planned to kill you. I just wanted to make it too difficult for you to wed her before Christmas.”

Nick tossed the cravat pin at Joseph, who fumbled with it and just managed to stop it from falling to the floor.

“I know you didn’t want to kill me. You don’t have it in you, Thornwich. You’re feckless, you’re a wastrel and you’re dissolute. But you are not a murderer. Take the money, turn your life around and do the right thing for that babe in Edna’s belly. You know, my mother is friends with her mother so I used to know her reasonably well. She’s not a bad sort. But you treat her badly. Give up the courtesans and the mistresses and give her a chance to be a proper wife.”

“What about this?” Joseph held up the pin. “Are you going to get the magistrate involved?”

“I have no evidence.” Nick raked his fingers through his hair. “Look, tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Come to the wedding with Edna, walk your sister down the aisle and give her away into what I can only hope will be a happy marriage. Let us all start again. The money and the help are yours. We shall be brothers by marriage. It is the least I can do.”

“I don’t deserve it,” said Joseph quietly.

“Perhaps not, but then I don’t deserve to be marrying someone as special and kind-hearted as your sister. I’m lucky. I didn’t lose my parents at sixteen. You may have turned out differently but for that carriage accident. I’ve done enough things in my life that I’m not proud of.”

“I don’t know, Eastden. It’s a very generous offer.”

“Don’t be a damned fool, Thornwich. We all know farming is hard these days. If your land becomes worthless, Chetfern land loses value too.” He turned to Gabriella and scowled. “Stop looking at me like that. This is business, nothing more. And Thornwich, put that damned marriage licence back in the drawer where you found it.” With that Nick stomped out of the room, leaving brother and sister alone in the study together.

Joseph turned shining eyes on Gabriella and she choked back tears.

“I’m so sorry, Gabs.”

She nodded as a big tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek. “I know,” she managed.

“Do you want me to walk you down the aisle? I would understand if you sent me to the devil.”

“You are the only thing I have left of father and mother. All I ever wanted was for you to care, Joseph.”

He moved slowly then wrapped her in a hug, his large frame enveloping her, his tears dripping onto her hair.



Nick paced across the drawing room again. What was taking them so long? Was that brother of hers trying to talk her out of marrying him? He should not have left her alone with him but, at the same point, she needed to mend the relationship she had with her brother in her own way. And besides, he could not take that look she was giving him as if he was some kind of Christmas angel.

Had it not been for Nick, Gabriella’s life may have been very different. His own mother would probably have sponsored her come out. Thornwich would probably not have been such a prize ass and possibly neither would he have been. His own father would have taught Gabby’s brother to manage his estate and how to enjoy life but enjoy it responsibly just as he did.

He heard the front door slam and hurried to the window to see Thornwich swing himself easily up onto his horse, the snow already settling on top of his hat.

The fast padding of her slippers over the parquet flooring alerted him to her presence, then her arms were around his waist as she too watched her brother ride down the private road.

“I hope he shall be all right in all this snow.”

“He’s safer on horseback than in a carriage,” Nick said. “Is

everything all right between you two?"

"Well, we have some way to go but I think we made a start towards some kind of brother-sister relationship. He is returning to Thornwich then he and Edna are coming straight here so that he will not miss the wedding. Will that be all right?"

"Yes. I'll let the servants know. And what about the marriage licence?"

"Back in the drawer as you asked. Nick, he plans to follow your lead and start again. He wants to make a go of Thornwich estate. He says he will pay you back as soon as the estate starts making money."

"There really is no need, but he and I can sort that out sometime in the future."

"Nick?" Her voice had turned coquettish.

"Yes."

"Do married people only...you know...at night?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because when we were out in the woods yesterday, it was daytime."

"And?"

"Well I know we did not do the act but had we been married might we have?"

"Yes, we might have."

"So it can be done during the day."

"Yes."

"Could it be done now?"

"If we were married, yes it could."

She nodded. He frowned. Where was she going with this?

"And if we were married, would you want to? Now?"

Was it reassurance? And if so, reassurance of what? Reassurance that he wanted her or reassurance that he would not be pouncing on her at every opportunity?

He strode over and closed the drawing room doors. If anyone walked in, they would find them talking... or at worst kissing. Nothing more. He was not going to debauch her on the drawing room chaise, much though he wanted to. He moved back and sat down beside her on the chaise.

"Men have needs and ladies have needs too, but men seem to have more frequent needs," he started. "Men can be aroused throughout the day even sometimes when they are not thinking about ladies with whom they want to couple. Sometimes we wake up aroused without dreaming of anything we desire. So yes, at this time of day we may want to couple and we may choose to. You may want to bed me or vice versa at any time of the day or night. Sometimes propriety will mean it cannot happen, sometimes one or other of us will not want to

because we are tired or ill. But know this—you can always refuse and I will not complain and whether I am I bedding you or not I find you beautiful and charming and enticing.”

“Nick, you do not have to say such things. I know the truth.”

He gritted his teeth and smoothed the back of his fingers down the cheek with her birthmark.

“Oh no, Gabby, you do not know the truth. You don’t know that when I am not with you I have conversations in my head with you where I try to make you laugh just so I can see you smile. Your eyes shine and you light up the room when you laugh. You make my heart leap out my chest when I see you. When we are in a room, I want to be near enough to smell the lavender soap that you use or to feel the warmth of your body or the brush of the hem of your skirts against my ankle. But no other woman would do, Gabriella. Only you. And I wish I could take back what I said all those years ago. I’m sorry for hurting you and for the pain I caused our families. I do hope that one day you can forgive me.”

Gabriella smiled.

“I already forgave you, Nick, but you need to forgive yourself. What you did today has more than made up for the strawberry jam remark. It is time to move on.”

Nick felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He gathered her in his arms and sank back against the armrest of the chaise, enjoying the feel of her head against his chest. They remained there for a long time, just listening to the other breathe, happy to be in one another’s company.

Yes, he wanted to drag her up his body and impale her on his hard flesh but he was just as content to lie here and enjoy her silent company.

Besides, there was only twenty-four hours left.

Chapter 23

Nick looked over the drawing room and caught the brown gaze of his wife, who bit her lip shyly and sent a spear of need straight to his groin. She looked stunning in a white satin gown with a silver overdress embroidered with glistening rosebuds. Her hair had been curled up off her face in an elaborate coif and hot house flowers had been laced strategically between the locks. He noticed someone had powdered her cheek to mask the birthmark that still seemed to cause her so much distress. He grimaced internally. She had no need to hide it, but he understood why she did it nonetheless.

She was talking to her sister-in-law and pointing out the window where another heavy fall of snow was currently in progress. Joseph and Edna had arrived the night before along with the rest of their guests, fearing that the inclement weather would prevent them from attending the nuptials. The woman had seemed to have a personality change in the length of time it had taken Thornwich to go home, pack and come back. She had been most pleasant at dinner. Perhaps Thornwich's new leaf extended to his marriage. Nick hoped so because he saw potential in Edna and the women seemed to be getting on well. Also Edna now had her rival for the staff's affections out of her house. That had to be a relief. He understood there was often jealousy when a new mistress arrived.

"Thank you, Eastden, for everything." Nick turned to find his brother by marriage watching Edna and Gabriella chuckling at something Nick's young cousin Jack was doing. The three-year-old was rolling around on the floor and singing. Nick did not want to know what the child was up to.

Nick raised his brandy glass. "To new beginnings."
"Aye, to new beginnings."



Gabriella curtsayed to her partner, an elderly uncle of her new husband, and drew in a deep breath. The impromptu dancing in the large drawing room had delighted her. A number of servants with varying degrees of musicality were coerced into playing, the rugs were rolled back and furniture pushed against the wall.

This set of country dances had been particularly lively and Gabriella was completely out of breath. She walked over to the chaise where Nick sat alone, nursing a brandy. He could not have been there for long because he had been talking to the vicar when this set had begun.

“Oh, Nick, be a dear and fetch me a drink, please.”

“No.”

She turned to him, aghast. Had he just refused to get a lady a drink? And his own wife at that?

“Nick? What...” He leaned close and his breath tickled the hairs falling out of her coif near her ear.

“Time to get that beautiful fur-lined cloak you wore to the church and your boots, my dear. The only person you shall be getting hot and bothered with for the rest of the evening is me.”

“But it is only six o’clock.”

“It is nearly seven o’clock. It will take at least half an hour for us to extract ourselves from all these relatives and we have half a mile in the snow to walk. And then I am going to wish you a very special and very early Merry Christmas.” He ran a finger down her bare arm and she shivered, turning to gaze into his hazel eyes. They burned with desire, and anticipation coiled through her. “Come, my love,” he coaxed gently. “It is time and there is nothing of which to be afraid.”



“You were rather optimistic in your theory that it would only take half an hour to extract ourselves from your relatives,” Gabriella said as they rounded the side of the stables and headed down the path to the dower house. The snow was eight inches thick and still falling.

Nick flung his arm around her and pulled her into his body to help keep her warm, but she struggled free. “I think they were deliberately trying to stop us getting away. Trying to frustrate me, I’d say.”

"I do believe they were," she giggled and he chuckled in reply.

The path dipped down a slight incline and she clutched the arm of his coat. Nick held the lantern he carried higher just as his foot gave way on some unseen ice. His sore knee protested the extra pull on it. It seemed that the world overturned slowly as he landed with a thud in the soft snow. A little squeal of terror came from his wife's lips as he sucked in the air which had been brutally expelled from his lungs. A quick mental assessment of his body told him nothing had been damaged including his previous injuries.

"Oh Nick, are you all right? My darling."

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Just help me up." He raised his hand and she took it. In one swift movement he pulled her down on top of him. She squealed and kicked unconvincingly.

"Oh you vexing man," she cried as she wriggled in his grasp.

He rolled her into the snow, covering her body with his and kissed her hard and thoroughly. He would not chance her catching a chill keeping her in the snow for any length of time but he needed to claim her as his, even if only briefly.

He lifted his head and tried to look at her but their lantern had gone out. It was almost pitch black, he was hard as a brick and she was reaching up for another kiss.

"We need to hurry. I don't want you catching a chill," he said gruffly, scrambling to his knees.

"A little snow never hurt anyone," she protested.

"Come on." He got to his feet and held his hand out to her. She accepted and he pulled her to a standing position. He grabbed the now useless lantern and turned in the direction of the lights from the dower house.

"Nick?"

"Yes."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No. Why would you think that?" He pulled her against him again and this time she did not pull away.

"You were playful, then you kissed me and then you were all business-like and gruff all within about a minute. I would have kissed you back but I was taken unawares."

"I know."

"Then why did you pull away?"

"Because, my darling, if I hadn't, I was in very near danger of lifting that lovely wedding down, unfastening my knee breeches and consummating our marriage in the snow."

"Really?" Her voice was full of wonder.

"Really. And much though it may have been pleasurable while it was happening, I doubt you taking a fever tomorrow would enhance

our Christmas any.”

“I suppose not. Nick?”

“Yes.”

“When we consummate the marriage, will we be... naked?” This last word came out in a stage whisper and he suppressed a chuckle.

“I would like that very much.” He did not think he had ever had sex without any clothes on before. It had only ever been a quick tumble and the very idea of being skin-to-skin made him grow even harder, if that was possible.

“Nick?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother said a maid would prepare me for you, but I don’t need a maid.”

“That is fine. What about your gown and its fastenings and your stays?” There was a moment’s silence and he could tell she was embarrassed.

“If we are going to be naked, surely you can undo a few buttons and a few laces, can you not?”

Devil take it. The woman was trying to make his nether-regions explode with want.

“I can, if that is what you would prefer.”

“It is.”

“Will you be willing to help remove my boots?” he asked, hoping he could dismiss his valet too.

“Of course.”

“Then I shall send the servants to bed as soon as we get in the house.”

They had arrived and they stepped up onto the sweeping porch, stamping the snow off their boots. He turned and brushed the snow off Gabriella’s back and she returned the favour just as the butler opened the door.

“Ah, Speirs. Thank you,” said Nick, handing his hat and gloves to the older man. He turned to Gabby, who was shivering and having trouble with the ribbon on her fur-trimmed bonnet. He helped her out of them and her soaking kid gloves. “Right, I think we need some hot chocolate brought to her ladyship’s bedchamber, then bank the fires everywhere but that room and send all the servants to bed, including her maid and my valet.” The butler gave him a quizzical look but said nothing.

Nick helped Gabriella out of her thick fur cloak and handed it to the butler before shrugging out of his own cloak. Her gown was dry save for the hem that had been dragged through the snow.

He hurried her into the warm bedchamber. She shuddered at the change of temperature and he walked straight to her dressing room,

found a thick woollen shawl and returned, draping it round her shoulders and pressing her into a seat by the fire.

"Sorry," she whispered, wrapping the shawl tightly around herself.

"No need to apologise. I should not have pulled you into the snow."

"I shall warm up quickly enough now I am by the fire."

He turned when the maid brought in a tray laid with a large pot of hot chocolate, two cups and some sandwiches and cakes. She set it down on the small desk where Nick indicated, bobbed a curtsy and left.

Nick quickly fetched Gabriella a cup of hot chocolate before getting his own and sitting opposite her.

"Why did the butler give you a funny look when you said to bank all the fires but this one?"

"Did he?"

"You know he did."

"Well, despite the fact everyone knows that I will come to your bed and consummate the marriage, it is still the tradition that I go to my room, undress and come to you, make love then return to my own room before the maid arrives in the morning."

"So everyone pretends it's not happening? For what purpose?"

He shrugged.

"I have no idea because if there is not a stain on the sheet in the morning, you can guarantee that it would be the talk of the servants' quarters too."

"A stain?"

"Yes." He sighed. "My mother really did not tell you much, did she?"

"I did not ask much."

"Yet you have no concerns about asking me."

She smiled. "You are my husband."

"I was not your husband until twelve hours ago."

"No, but before that you were my betrothed."

"True. I like that you trust me. Do you trust me enough to show you rather than explain in detail?"

Her eyebrows raised and her shy smile was back. "First we need to get my boots off though." He raised one leg and she giggled. She placed her cup on the table at her side and moved to him, taking the boot in both hands and tugging. Not being quite as strong or as adept as a gentleman's valet, it took her a few attempts to remove the footwear. By the time the second one lay on the floor beside its twin she was gasping and laughing, her bosom heaving and her face bright, her eyes glistening.

"Come here," he said gruffly. Her grin waned and she approached

him warily, but he knew she was not afraid.

He lifted her wedding gown at the skirt until he could see her knees. It was still damp and heavy.

"Put one knee on this side of my hip and one of the other and sit on my lap." His voice was hoarse and he knew the hold he had on his self-control was tenuous at best. She did as he asked. "Now kiss me, as hard or as soft as you like. You are in control, Gabriella."

She placed a hand on either side of his face then lowered her mouth to his, moving her lips tentatively at first, waiting to see how he reacted. When he followed her lead, she became bolder, exploring his lips with her tongue then pushing it into his mouth.

Nick reached down and worked loose the laces of first one of her boots then the other as he surrendered to Gabriella's increasingly bold explorations. He pushed the boots off then set about rubbing the ice blocks that were her feet. Her toes curled and she squirmed on his lap, pulling her lips away from his.

"Sorry, I have ticklish feet," she murmured as she pressed her mouth back to his. He rubbed her feet with more vigour and she relaxed back into the kiss.

For a long time they sat in front of the fire, kissing, his hands rubbing her cold feet, her hands toying with his hair, little moans of pleasure escaping from one or the other sporadically.

For all his need to bed her and make her his own, he was happy to relax and allow this to take its own form and to allow her to lead. When she began to rock her hips against his ever-present erection, he knew it was time to move on.

He found the buttons at the back of her gown and started to undo them. When she realised what he was doing, she withdrew from the kiss and gazed into his eyes. She was hypnotising. As his fingers reached the small of her back and the last button he moved his hands back up the cotton of her chemise.

"Can I see you naked?" she asked suddenly.

He was taken aback but chuckled. "That is the general idea, my love."

"I mean before I am naked."

"If you want."

"I do."

He shrugged. "You get that wet gown off then, I'll untie your stays and while you take your hair down and braid it, I shall undress."

"Fine." She climbed off his lap and presented her back and the laces of her stays to him.

By the time he had sat on the bed and released his garters and pulled off one stocking, she was sitting at the mirror in just her chemise, pulling pins from her hair and allowing those glorious

blonde curls to fall over her shoulders.

He had never undressed so quickly in his life. In seconds he had shed every item of clothing and was crossing to stand behind her.

She was dragging a brush through her hair as if she was a mangy horse. He caught her hand and stopped her, uncurling her fingers and taking over the task.

“Nick, it’s dreadfully knotted. It needs more vigour than that.”

The moment she looked properly in the mirror and saw his naked form in it, he knew. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, and he could not help but preen.



Gabriella’s gaze took in the taut stomach muscles, the indented line of his hip, the nest of dark curls and his rod—as the countess had described it. There was no way that would fit inside her body, no matter how much the countess had said her muscles would stretch to accommodate him.

That said, the countess had also said babies came out that way and with the best will in the world, the rod was not bigger than a baby. So maybe she was right.

“What happened to trusting me?” Nick said, his voice low and encouraging. She swallowed.

“I do. I just didn’t expect it to be so big.”

“Gabby, would you leave your hair loose for me?” It was his first request of the evening. She nodded and stood, her gaze settling on his face as he settled on the tie of her chemise. She placed her hands on his shoulders, feeling the indentation of his collarbone. He raised his gaze to her face and curled his fingers into her waist-length hair. There were mere inches between them and one thin layer of cotton. She skimmed her fingers over the muscles of his chest, relishing the tightening of each muscle group as she reached it.

She smoothed the smattering of hair on his chest and around his small brown nipples. When her thumb brushed one, he sucked in a breath. She tried it again and although not close enough to feel the jerk of his manhood, she was aware it had happened.

“Nick?”

“Yes.”

“Is it strange that I want to kiss it?”

He made a kind of strangled noise as his grip in her hair tightened.

“Not at all. Feel free,” he ground out.

And so she did. She caught the tiny nubbin between her lips but it was too small so she stuck out her tongue and swirled round the raised peak. He dropped his head back and groaned. But it sounded like a good groan. She tried the other nipple, this time being a little more daring, catching it between her teeth before rubbing her tongue over the distended tip.

“Oh God, this is torture,” he whispered.

She straightened and pressed a kiss to his throat. She had enjoyed it when he had done that to her. Her hands continued to move over his hard stomach.

He brought his head forward and his hands to her face.

“It’s my turn now,” he rasped.

“But I...” She had not touched or learned anything about his stomach, or his backside, or the rod, or the balls or his strong thighs.

“You can finish your inspection later. Remember in the woods when you found the peak of pleasure?” She nodded. She had been barely able to think of much else whenever she had been alone in the past few days. “It’s time to take you there again.”

“All right.” She lifted her chemise slightly and moved closer, wrapping her arms around the neck and opening her legs, waiting for him to place his thigh between, but he shook his head.

“There is more than one route to that peak, my love.” He tugged the chemise out of her grasp and over her head. She was naked, in front of a man. He may be her husband but this was deuced uncomfortable. But when she met his gaze and the burning passion in them, the hand that wanted to cover her cheek flexed and fell back to her side.

He found her beautiful. He had said as much, though until she had seen that look in his eyes, she had not fully believed it. He marched to the bed, grabbed the covers and flung them to the bottom of the bed. He stalked back to her, lifted her in his arms, kissed her then took her over to the bed and laid her on it, her head on the soft feather pillows, her body stretched before him like a sacrifice.

His lips met hers as he climbed onto the bed, dropping half to the side of her, half atop her so as not to crush her with his weight. She curled her fingers into his hair while his tongue swept around her mouth and stroked her own tongue. She could drown in his passionate kisses if she was not careful. His hand moved onto her hip, rubbing up and down, clasp ing at her thigh then letting go. She wanted to wrap that thigh over his hip but she was afraid of looking wanton.

“Gabby, in this bed, you can touch whatever you want to touch, do whatever you want to do. If it feels right, then do it. It is the only rule to lovemaking. If you don’t like something, say so and I shall stop. But

allow your body the chance to accept the new sensation first before you call a halt. Then if you still don't like it, I shall stop. Do you understand?"

She nodded. He meant like when they were in the woods. Part of her wanted to stop because the sensations were frightening, but she had trusted him and it had been worth it.

"Nick, I trust you. I know it will hurt this first time but I am not afraid to become your wife." He nodded and placed a kiss on her cheek, then on her nose, then on her other cheek.

Before long he had kissed all over her face and was peppering kisses along her jaw and down her neck. The feeling in her core was increasing again and she desperately needed something to rock against. Suddenly his fingers were there, exploring her folds, making her groan in pleasure as his mouth descended on her erect nipple.

She grabbed hold of the pillow and arched her back, offering her breast to him, unsure what to do about the storm brewing within. He moved to the other breast as he pressed the heel of his hand to the front of her intimate place. It was as if he had found the one part of her that could give her ultimate pleasure. She writhed and he grunted in satisfaction.

She grappled at the pillow, fearful that if she touched him her nails would score his skin or that she would pull his hair out by the roots—such was the pleasure he was giving her.

"Oh Nick," she managed—not quite sure what she was asking for. He bit her nipple then soothed it with his tongue. Round and round the little nubbin, he teased and tickled as she mewled out her pleasure like a cat.

Then he lifted his head. She opened her eyes and caught his gaze as he slowly but surely pushed one finger into her opening. She tried to relax just as his lips broke into a reassuring smile. She tried to smile back. It was a strange intrusion, but she could not help clench her muscles around his digit.

"You're so tight and wet," he growled, easing the finger almost fully out before pushing it back in as far as he could reach.

"Is that... is that a good thing?" she asked in a whisper. Surely wet was never a good thing down in that part of the anatomy. His smile widened.

"Yes, my inquisitive darling. It's a very good thing."

She relaxed slightly as he used the thumb of his free hand to rub that pleasure point. He was kneeling beside her now, his rod sitting upright against his belly, fluid glistening at the tip, catching the glow from the candles and giving Gabriella the sudden urge to press her lips to it.

But his ministrations stole her thoughts. She moved her attention

back to his face and his dark gaze and the need he was drilling into her with his hands. He had been slowly working that finger and now he added a second, then he stretched out alongside her, the heel of his hand pressing against her pleasure point as he wrapped his free hand around her shoulders.

"Move if you want to, my love," he said quietly. And she did. Rocking initially, building the need up as he had done. He pressed kisses to her forehead as he continued to stoke the fire, murmuring words of encouragement. Her movement had become frantic and she knew she was close to that peak where he had taken her out in the woods.

He worked his fingers faster and pressed his hand harder against her desperate flesh. She buried her face in his neck and her fingernails into his back as the explosion erupted within her. She cried out his name while surges of pleasure seared through her very being and the world fell away leaving just Nick and her, husband and wife, lovers.

As the flames died down, she felt the slow circles his fingers were tracing on her back. He had pulled his fingers from her heat and was soothing her. She felt boneless and satisfied but there was more. She knew that and part of her feared the satisfaction would be fleeting.



At last the time had come.

Nick rolled Gabby onto her back, his manhood jerking at the sight of her kiss-swollen lips, mussed hair and passion-flushed skin. His cousin Harold had told him just to do the deed. The older man's advice had been that it would be easier for her if he was quick about it the first time. He hated to think what Harold knew about bedding virgins given that he was a confirmed bachelor.

Nick was still holding most of his weight to the side of her. He followed her fingers with his gaze as they stroked down his chest, over his stomach to rest just above the tip of his erection. She glanced up into his face and he lifted his gaze, nodding.

She ran the tip of her thumb over the slit, smearing moisture over the head and causing him to bite back a moan. In response he reached for her nipple and rubbed his thumb around the distended tip.

When Gabriella moved her hand down and circled her fingers around his rigid length, he did groan. He was going to sink into her very soon but she would be heading for the precipice again

when he did.

He kissed up to her neck to the back of her ear, then down her jaw until he captured her mouth, all the time she lightly stroked him, sending him near to insanity. He needed to be inside her. He had needed this since their first kiss outside her bedchamber.

He moved atop her, never breaking the kiss, wresting his manhood from her grip. She moved her hand onto his buttock, urging him. He kissed her deeper, pressing the tip of his erection through her folds, stopping to allow it to press against the spot that made her moan and buck her hips.

She truly was the most sensual creature he had ever had the fortune to meet. He moved his erection again and found her opening, pressing in before he had the chance to think about it.

She squeaked and tightened her grip on him. He pushed further. *Just do the deed.* When he was buried to the hilt, he pulled her closer, kissed her more intently before withdrawing. He was sure she had not breathed since his initial intrusion.

“Breathe, my love.” He pulled back his head as he pushed into her again and her wrinkled brow began to relax. A few more strokes and her eyes had darkened again. He could enjoy the feel of his wife’s hot, tight body encasing his hard length. He had surely found heaven.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his shoulders, moving in counterpoint to him, an equal in this quest in every sense. He lowered his head into the crook of her neck and succumbed to his need. He felt her body pulse around his. Good god, she had climaxed again. The thought drove him on, harder and deeper. She matched him thrust for thrust, whispering something in his ear, something about love and trust.

He had reached his limit. His self-control shattered into a million pieces as his body stiffened and expelled his seed into her warm, wet, welcoming body. His mind was incapable of thought as he mindlessly rocked, emptying himself into her... not just his seed but his heart and his soul. He’d known he was falling in love with Gabby but he had not quite realised that the task was already complete.

“Merry Christmas,” he heard her whisper as he rolled them both onto their sides and gave in to sleep of a well-satiated bridegroom.

Chapter 24

Nick rolled over in bed and reached for his bride. His eyes popped awake when all he felt were cold flat sheets. He lifted his head and looked around. He was aware of the warmth of the fire despite his bare shoulders.

It was still dark but the orange glow allowed him to look around the bedchamber to see if Gabriella was anywhere to be seen. Perhaps she had gone to visit the necessary. He groaned and placed his head back on the pillow. What a cad. He should have offered to fetch a cloth and water for her. She would have bled and there would have been the mess of his seed for her to clean up.

He moved to sit up, swinging his legs over the bed. He stopped when he saw her sitting on the large soft window seat, a warm, woollen dressing robe wrapped around her as she gazed outside.

“Gabby?”

She turned her head, a smile lighting her face. “You’re awake.”

“What time is it?”

“About six.”

He got to his feet and enjoyed the appreciative sweep of her gaze over his naked form. Need pierced through him. He grabbed a blanket from the bed and draped it over his shoulders.

“Did you call a servant to light the fire?”

“No, I lit it myself.”

“Yourself?”

She chuckled. “Thornwich has not had many servants for some time. We managed to hide the fact from you while you were there but I am used to having to set the fire in my room.”

“I see.” He turned his attention to the window. “Is it snowing?”

“Yes, it’s rather heavy again.”

“We shall not make it to the Christmas morning service in the village.”

She chuckled. “Oh my love, the vicar was well into his cups last

night when we left your parents' house and the roads will be impassable now. If he is well enough to hold a service this morning, at best it will be held in the chapel here and at worst in your parents' drawing room."

"I suppose it will." He sat opposite her and pulled his feet up onto the seat, urging her legs apart so he could wriggle his feet between them, under her knees to rest on either side of her naked hips. She did not seem to mind his familiarity and the warmth of her body heated his cooling extremities.

"Would you like to go to the breakfast at the main house? I am sure there will be a number of festivities going on all day given that none of our guests will have had the opportunity to leave due to the inclement weather."

"Oh!" Her face lit up for a moment before she frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought if I wore this you would want to couple until I was unable to walk." She opened her dressing gown to reveal a sheer red nightrail, cut so deeply and so revealing that she may as well have been wearing nothing. He whistled low as his body reacted promptly to the sight of her tightening nipples.

"Where the hell did you learn a phrase like that?" he asked, holding out his hand to her. Once she took it he urged her forward until she was kneeling across him, her thighs straddling his, her nipples at the perfect height for him to catch them in his mouth.

"Your mother said that if I wore this you would want to couple with me until I could no longer walk and if not you needed to go and see about getting eyeglasses."

He threw back his head and laughed. Who knew his mother had such a wicked sense of humour. No wonder his father had remained completely faithful to her.

"While I applaud my mother's sentiments, I would prefer not to cause you more pain than I already have. And much though I would like to couple with you until you cannot walk, I would prefer to ensure that you have a fun and happy Christmas. We shall have breakfast here then we shall go down to the manor for the service. That gives us about three hours. I do believe it would be a shame to allow this beautiful nightrail to go to waste."

Through the sheer satin material, he licked and suckled at her nipple, guided by her gasps and moans and the way she grabbed his hair and rocked against his aching erection. His hands roamed over the nightrail, then under it as he continued to lave at her fabric-covered peaks. He could never tire of her. She was like clay in his hands, being moulded and turning into something even more beautiful with every movement of his flesh against hers. And he loved how she

responded to him—that she had no modesty when it came to finding her own pleasure.

When he could stand her rubbing her sex against his hardened flesh no longer, he grasped her around the hips and lifted her. Moving one hand to her arse to keep her in position, he slid his fingers through her folds to find them slick and ready for him.

“Let me find you a more comfortable seat, my love.” He grinned, positioning himself at her opening. She raised an eyebrow but she was not an idiot. She knew what he was doing and what he wanted. “Go down slowly so you don’t hurt either of us,” he encouraged in a low, soft tone. As she sank onto his shaft he watched the myriad of expressions cross her face—concern, need, worry, enjoyment, interest, lust. He moved his hand away as she continued to sheath him. He bit back a moan, intent on watching her face.

“Oh Nick,” she whispered.

Surprise lit her features when at last he felt her fully seat herself atop him.

He chuckled, making her clench her muscles around him, turning his laugh into a groan.

“You didn’t think you could take all of me, did you?”

She shook her head, her recently braided hair moving slightly. He pushed an escaping curl behind her ear.

“Kiss me and then I shall relinquish all control to you. Go as fast or as slow as you like.”

And she did. After a long, slow, toe-curling kiss which had Nick reaching to the depth of his soul for self-control to stop him gathering her in his arms, stalking to the bed and rutting into her until he was sated, she started to move, angling herself, twisting and rubbing until she found just the right stroke to give her the ultimate pleasure. He watched in wonder, toying with her nipples, kneading her breasts and arse and occasionally skimming his thumb between them to press on that part of her that made her suck in a breath and give a little shudder of pleasure.

She rode him expertly, and though she was finding her own pleasure, she was ramping up his in small increments. As someone who had been single for a long time and had no great fondness for bawdy houses, he’d spend many nights slaking his lust into his own hand or tamping it down entirely.

At last she threw her arms around his neck, riding him slowly and intently. She was close, he could feel it in the tension in her muscles. She whimpered and he began to slowly match her movements, his own need beginning to take on a life of its own.

“Oh Nick, I can’t...” She wailed quietly. He caught hold of her hips and pumped hard upwards into her. His body took over, the

uncomfortable position be damned. His renewed participation seemed to spur her back to life and she rocked against him. He couldn't wait for her. He could see to her pleasure afterwards if necessary. He pressed his fingers between them, hard, tearing a howl of need from her. His balls tightened one more time, his muscles became like steel and he shot his seed deep inside her in one final upward thrust.

He was rigid. Perched between the window seat and the wall, his fingers digging into his wife's hips, just as Gabriella's fingers dug into his. As his body relaxed he was aware of her internal walls throbbing around his erection.

He huffed out his breath and sank back onto the cushion of the window seat, gathering her into his arms, appreciating the soft fluttering of her internal muscles around his slowly deflating member.

He wondered if it was he who would be unable to walk by the time they made it to the manor house.

"Nick?"

"Yes."

"I know it is not very fashionable, especially when one's husband only married one as a result of a wager—" he stilled, dread filling his heart "—but I think I may have fallen in love with you. Is that terribly silly?"

He relaxed, running his hand over her soft bare arse which was sticking up at a very cute angle since her knees were still tucked under her.

"No, my love. That's not silly at all. Despite the fact I only married you to win a wager and because your brother can be a complete idiot, I do believe I have fallen in love with you."

"Nick?"

"Yes, my love."

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Gabby."

Epilogue

Twenty-Fifth December 1819

Gabriella bounced John, Viscount Marsden, her nephew on her knee and looked over to the window. A smile touched her lips as she noticed her brother's hand very briefly curl around Edna's fingers before coming back to rest at his side. She could not quite believe the change that had come over her errant brother since the previous Christmas.

"Ah ah," cried the infant on her knee as he began to struggle. Edna turned around and came hurrying over as Gabriella readjusted the child.

"I am sorry, Gabriella. I think it is time for his nap."

"Oh, he is fine, Edna," said Gabriella, a little disappointed that her time with her gorgeous nephew would be so short. Edna chuckled.

"Oh, Gabby, he's tired. I promise you can come up to the nursery and see him after his nap." Slightly mollified, Gabriella relinquished her charge and muttered an apology.

"No need to apologise. We all feel the same way in the first couple of months when we are increasing."

Gabriella felt her heart leap into her throat.

"I...I...."

Edna chuckled.

"I take it you have not told Eastden yet."

"No. I was waiting until tonight. I thought it would be a nice present."

"In that case, my lips are sealed."

"Is it so obvious?"

"Only to me."

"And to Joseph."

"Oh good God, Gabby, you could be waltzing naked with the Duke

of Wellington round the drawing room and Joseph would not notice except to ask if I thought your companion might like a brandy and a game of cards... for pennies, of course."

Gabriella chuckled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Come on, John, time for bed." With that, the Countess of Thornwich left the room under the watchful and rather lusty gaze of her husband.

Gabriella wandered through the hallway until she came across the earl's study. There perched on the desk was Nick, a frown on his face.

"Nick?"

"Yes?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you. Close and lock the door."

She did as he asked then raised an eyebrow at him.

"What took you so long?"

"I did not know we had an appointment."

"I thought you would follow."

"Sorry, I didn't know you wanted me to follow. I was playing with John."

"I saw. I could not watch any longer."

"Why?"

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

"Every time your courses come you seem distant and I feel you withdraw."

"Well, it would be rather messy to couple when I have my courses."

"But I know you are disappointed and it breaks my heart. And then I see you with John. Your eyes were filled with tears when you were bouncing him on your knee and I..." He let out a roar of frustration. It looked as if Nick was going to have to get his Christmas gift a few hours early.

"Nick?"

"Yes."

"When did I last have my course?"

"I don't know."

"It was before we went to London. When did we go to London?"

"Mid-October."

"That is correct." She waited for him to connect the facts in his head.

"So you have missed your courses twice?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You are increasing?"

She nodded again.

"I am to become a father." Her lips split into a grin.

“You are.”

“Oh, Gabby.” He lifted her up into his arms and swung her round, pressing kisses to her before letting her down, cupping her cheeks and peppering kisses all over her face. “You...wonderful...clever...fantastic...perfect...beautiful...adorable...woman. I love you beyond measure.”

She giggled. “I will take it that you are happy at the news.”

“Deliriously so. Thank you.”

“Merry Christmas, my love.”

“Merry Christmas.”

His mouth descended on hers as he inched her skirts up. It was time for Gabby to receive her gift.

The St Nicholas Day Wager

Em Taylor

Chapter 1

Fifth of December, 1818, three minutes to midnight

“So, Eastden, how is the old broken heart faring?” Thornwich’s

voice rang out through the dining room of White’s Gentlemen’s Club, but no one really noticed. To a gentleman, everyone was as far into his cups as were Nick and his friends – if one could call them friends.

If truth be told, the company in town at this time of year, early December, left a lot to be desired. Every gentleman around this table was as dissolute as he. They were all rakes and libertines, even the married ones, and at this moment in time they were all utterly foxed.

Nick swirled the brandy in his glass and watched it coat the inside before dribbling back into the pool of dark amber liquid. Then he looked up at the man who had just spoken.

“Broken-hearted, Thornwich? I don’t know what you mean.”

“Lady Angela—Sedgewick’s daughter. You seemed very keen on her during the season and then suddenly she was betrothed to the bastard son of the Duke of Hawkhill.”

“Mm, yes,” mused Nick, trying to sound non-committal. “I am sure she is very happy with Mr Stevenson and he is obscenely rich.”

“I hear she is already increasing, Eastden. It’s not yours, is it?”

Nick tried to focus on his tormenter. What in devil’s name was he doing here with this ass?

“Unlike you, Thornwich, I do not make a habit of ruining young ladies of the *ton*.”

A murmur moved around the table.

“God’s teeth, Eastden, you’re not suddenly going to become my moral compass. I married the young lady I ruined... well, one of them anyway.” He grinned around at his friends, some of whom nodded appreciatively at his joke while others suddenly became consumed with checking the contents of their own glasses.

“No, Thornwich. You have to live with the fact that two young ladies are now spinsters due to your reckless behaviour and the fact you seduced and ruined them. Not to mention the servants you have no doubt bedded. I was merely pointing out that I am not like you and since the only way to save your scrawny little neck was to marry Lady Edna, I would have expected nothing less of you.”

He was not entirely sure where his sudden moral outrage had come from. Thornwich had been his friend when they were boys. They had learned to fish together, they had dragged each other back to their feet after their first tumbles from horses and they had skimmed stones across his father's lake. Thornwich had never quite matched Nick's tally of nine skips.

Now Thornwich was an earl, had married Lady Edna Barrow, a pretty enough daughter of a viscount, but he still kept a number of mistresses and preferred to be in London with his rakehell friends than out at Thornwich with his perfectly lovely wife. The man was a fool.

Nick was vaguely aware of the clock chiming midnight in the hallway outside the dining room.

“You are just as dissolute as I am, Eastden,” Thornwich sneered. “The difference is that I am already an earl and that I am already married. You seem incapable of attaining either state of being.”

“I am not sure how you expect me to become an earl short of murdering my own father, which is ludicrous. As for marriage, I could have been married a hundred times over. When I walk into a ballroom all the mamas with marriageable daughters look at me with expectation.”

“Yet you remain a bachelor with no heir to carry on the earldom should your father outlive you.”

“I choose to remain a bachelor. Devil take it, I could be married by Christmas if I so decided, Thornwich.” It was the brandy talking. Nick knew it. This was his chance to shut his mouth and retreat.

“That sounds dangerously close to a wager, old man.”

“Do not tempt me, Thornwich, for you would lose.”

“Hmm, it is after midnight so it is now St Nicholas' Day. It would seem we are now in the Christmas season. Ten thousand pounds says you cannot marry my spinster sister before Christmas Day.”

“Your spinster sister? You mean Gabriella?”

“Yes. I mean Gabriella. She is eight and twenty and I would gladly pay someone to take her off my hands. She has had nine seasons and not one proposal of marriage. Besides, since you will no doubt lose, I could use the money.”

Nick looked around the table. All the men were now watching him avidly. It was a stupid bet but he had been put on the spot. Somehow he knew he was going to regret it in the morning but one look at

Thornwich's smug expression and something snapped inside him.

He had grown up with Gabby too. Their fathers' estates neighboured each other and until he had been sent away to school, Gabby, not Thornwich, had been his best friend. He had seen her on many occasions since her come out and now he came to think of it, he had no idea why he had never asked her to dance or even approached her to chat. Something niggled at the back of his mind. They had drifted apart, of course. It had been bound to happen but something had spoiled their friendship. Perhaps their parents had quarrelled. That was probably it. Why had she never married, though?

And then he remembered. The large strawberry birthmark across her cheek and nose. How had he managed to forget that? But surely that would not be enough to stop anyone asking for her hand. It was only a birthmark.

Perhaps because he had grown up with her and she had always just been Gabby that he had never really noticed the mark. As for his lack of gentlemanly behaviour, he had no answers. Thornwich's mouth had turned into a sneer. He was trying to set not just Nick up to fail but Gabriella too. What a cad.

"I shall accept your wager, Lord Thornwich." He turned to a footman. "The betting book, please," he said. He turned back to his adversary. "We leave tomorrow morning for your country estate."



Gabriella looked up from the ledger and rubbed her eyes, looking around her father's office and judging it dark enough to start lighting candles. It must be nearly four o'clock in the afternoon if it was already getting dark. No matter how she tried to make her sums add up they would not.

At that moment there was a sharp rap at the door and Gabriella bade the housekeeper to enter, along with a footman carrying a tray of sandwiches, cakes and tea.

"I apologise, Milady, but I knew you would forget to ring for tea so I took the liberty of getting cook to prepare a tray for you. I hope you don't mind."

The footman placed the tray on the desk, bowed and set about lighting candles all around the room. Gabriella smiled at the older woman who had all but brought Gabriella up. Of course, there had been governesses and nannies but it had always been to Mrs

McAllister whom Gabriella would run when she fell and hurt her knee or when other children would taunt her over her birthmark.

"Please sit and have tea with me, Mrs McAllister."

"Oh Milady, I'm not sure..."

"I insist," Gabriella said in a tone that brooked no reply. They played this game every day. The housekeeper knew that Gabriella was lonely and needed someone to talk to but she would never presume to be invited to sit for tea, despite two cups and saucers being set on the tray.

"As you wish," replied Mrs McAllister, sitting on the other side of the desk.

"Billy, did the Thatcher fix your mother's roof?" she asked as the footman bowed and prepared to leave.

"Yes, Milady. She was very pleased with it. She asked me to thank you but I forgot." The young man blushed furiously and Gabriella smiled kindly at him.

"Worry not, Billy, it shall be our secret."

"Yes, Milady. Thank you, Milady."

With that, he scurried off into the dark foyer to light some more candles. Gabby sighed. She had managed to pay for just one roof to be fixed. Billy's mother's roof had been the worst. However, there was no money for the rest.

"Perhaps you should think again about a companion, Lady Gabby," said the housekeeper as Gabriella poured the tea. The housekeeper was the only person she allowed to call her Gabby and even then, it was only when they were in private.

"We have been though this, Peggy. I am fine. I did try to find a companion but none suited. They were all so..."

She waved her hand, trying to think of a polite way to put it. Every woman she had interviewed seemed to be a foretaste of what she was about to become, an unwanted, unloved and bitter spinster. She may be alone but she had her work cut out for her running the estate.

Joseph, her brother, was a feckless wastrel with the most unpleasant wife. That said, Gabriella supposed that Edna had reason to be angry at the world. She had married a man who seemed intent on bedding every female in England, save herself. She'd had two miscarriages and was presently increasing again. Gabriella hoped for Edna's sake that the pregnancy would go well.

Peggy McAllister accepted the cup of tea.

"I know, lovey. I just worry about you is all."

"I am fine. I just need to convince my brother to release funds so I can make some repairs to the tenants' cottages and the stables. I shall write to him tonight."

A noise outside made Gabriella turn towards the window. She

recognised the coach pulling up in front of the ancient manor's front doors. The Thornwich crest was emblazoned on the side, bigger than most crests, making the whole thing look preposterous.

"Looks like you will be able to save your paper, Milady," said Peggy, standing and smoothing down her apron.

What Gabriella saw next turned her blood cold. Stepping out of her brother's travelling coach was none other than Viscount Eastden—Nicholas, her childhood friend. She had not spoken to him since that awful day when they were twelve years old and he had taunted her, telling her she was ugly and would end up an old spinster. The sad truth was he had been correct.

Chapter 2

Gabriella rose and glanced down at her appearance. Devil take

it. Why could her brother not have had the decency to let her know to expect a visitor? At least she would have worn something slightly more appropriate than her faded blue muslin day gown. She patted her blonde hair, wondering how much of the severe knot had come down as she had frustrated herself over the figures in the estate ledger. She had not even put any powder over her birthmark to minimise it. No-one in Thornwich Manor cared how ugly she looked.

Well, there was no point worrying about it now. She took a deep breath and walked into the foyer just as Joseph, Edna and Lord Eastden marched into the manor. Joseph's eyes lit on Gabriella and his expression became a sneer, as did Edna's.

"My darling sister. You remember Lord Eastden, of course." Gabriella curtsied politely at the man who bowed low and graciously to her. He had already removed his hat. Gabriella's breath hitched. The man was gorgeous. She had seen him at balls over the years but had never paid too much attention. For all his comment had been a silly, childish remark made in a fit of pique at her not allowing him to play with her new puppy, it still hurt.

"My lady. It is a pleasure. We have waited far too long to become reacquainted with each other."

"As I recall, my lord, you sent me to the devil at our last meeting and I have not yet reached there. I assumed you would not want to be acquainted with a lady who disobeyed your orders."

"I did?" Lord Eastden looked genuinely shocked and perplexed. "I do humbly beg your pardon, my lady. I do not recall saying such a thing. I shall not seek to make any excuses but I do beg your forgiveness for any offence I caused."

She waved away his apology. It was sixteen years too late in any case. She found it difficult to believe that he could not remember the cruel words and the curl of his lip.

"If everyone wants to go into the drawing room, I shall arrange for a tea tray while your rooms are being prepared. My lord," she turned to her brother, "I apologise. Had I known you were coming, I would have had your room and our guest's room prepared."

"Now, now, Gabs, don't be a spoilsport. You know I like to live in the moment."

"I shall order the tea," announced Edna. "I am, after all, lady of this house." Gabriella bit her tongue and nodded graciously at the countess.

"Of course, my lady. I do apologise for presuming."

"You can join us for tea if you wish, Gabriella, though I am not sure you are exactly dressed for visitors." Edna's gaze roved up and down Gabriella's attire and she could feel heat burn her cheeks.

"Thank you, but I beg you excuse me. I have work to finish."

"Have you organised dinner?" asked her sister-in-law.

"You have only just arrived. I was not expecting you."

The countess clicked her fingers at the footman standing to attention at the drawing room door.

"Fetch a tea tray, boy, and tell Mrs McAllister we expect dinner to be served at seven o'clock."

"Aye, my lady." Billy bowed and hurried off to do his mistress's bidding. Gabriella hated the way Edna spoke to the servants. She turned to her brother.

"My lord, if you'll excuse me?" She curtsied to her brother and then to their guest and hurried off in the direction of the long sweeping staircase, desperate for the sanctuary of her own suite of rooms.



As much as Nick tried to remember whatever it was he had said

to Gabby to upset her so, even all these years later, he could not recall it. He lay in the bath in his room, trying to remember anything after her teary farewell the day before he had gone to Eton. He had promised to write and tell her all about school and the other boys and the masters and his lessons but he never had. He had been caught up in his new life and even his mother had been lucky to get one quickly scrawled missive per term.

But that was not what had upset her. He could tell.

"My lord, you shall be late for dinner if you do not hurry." Carter,

his valet, stood beside the tub brandishing a razor.

“Ah yes. I do apologise. I was wool gathering.”

“Very good, sir, but it is nearly half past six.”

“Indeed.” Nick pulled himself to his feet and allowed the man to wrap a linen around him. He would work things out with Gabriella later and perhaps tell her about the wager. It seemed the right thing to do.



When he walked into the drawing room half an hour later,

clean-shaven, washed and dressed in one of his best dinner coats, his eyes alighted on Gabriella. He had travelled all day with Thornwich and his countess, bitterly regretting his stupid wager of the night before. But the wager was now in White's betting book and he had plans for the money he had saved from his generous allowance. He did not want to give it up to a wastrel like Thornwich. He had to win and he needed to get Gabriella on his side—either by telling her the truth, a gamble in itself—or by wooing her.

“Joseph, please. Three tenants need completely new roofs and...” But Thornwich held his hand up to his sister as he noticed their visitor had arrived. Gabriella blushed delightfully and turned to look in his direction. Her gaze swept up his length, making Nick's blood warm.

Or perhaps it was the dark red, high-waisted, low-cut gown that warmed his blood. It was a gown more suited to a young widow than an innocent lady, even one who was eight and twenty. The neckline of her dress had gold braiding, drawing attention to her perfect breasts. A gold chain hung around her slender neck, a large ruby pendant sitting just above the top of her cleavage. Her hairstyle was less severe this evening and curls framed her face, while the rest of her hair was piled high, making her appear slightly taller than she was.

As he worked to tamp down his physical reaction to her, suddenly the idea of marrying her, and more importantly bedding her, did not seem like quite such an onerous task anymore. How, though, would he go about convincing her to marry him in less than three weeks?

“My lord, would you like a drink?”

At this point, however, the gong went in the downstairs hall, calling them into dinner. Nick smiled at Gabriella while she frowned at the brandy decanter she had just indicated. The earl and countess moved to precede them downstairs and into the dining room. Nick

held out his arm and Gabriella reluctantly placed her gloved hand on his sleeve.

He looked down at her as they walked sedately downstairs but the woman he intended to marry looked straight ahead, her pert little nose in the air. He was on the side of her birthmark and, if he was honest, it was not particularly bad. Yes, it was obvious and it did mar her features somewhat but it was only skin discolouration and with her pink lips set in a little pout of disapproval, he had the sudden urge to kiss her.

Unfortunately, the woman's stiff posture and inability to look him in the eye told him that it would take some effort for him to win this St Nicholas' Day wager.

Chapter 3

“P lease, Mr Brown, the tenants’ roofs are in need of repair.

Water is leaking in and the draughts make it impossible for some to keep a fire lit. I can pay you in the spring once the new lambs have been sold at market.” Lady Gabriella’s voice drifted down the large hallway and Nick stopped, tapping his riding crop against his boot as he listened to his childhood friend’s plea.

“Lady Gabriella, you know I would fix them if I could but... I have mouths to feed too, my lady. Thatching is my only source of income. I need payment and so do my men. I am sorry, your ladyship, but there is nothing I can do if you do not have the funds to pay me.”

“What about jewellery? I only have a few necklaces owned by my mama but I could give you them.” There was a pause and Nick moved nearer to the open door. He could see Gabriella’s visitor. He was young, maybe thirty years old, sturdily built and wearing clothes that set him apart as a manual labourer.

“Perhaps you could sell them in London, my lady, and then pay me in money. I have no use for jewels and who would buy them out here in the country?”

Gabriella sighed. Nick’s heart went out to her. She’d probably known this fellow for years and this would be a very uncomfortable conversation.

“Is there nothing I can say to make you change your mind?” Her defeat was evident in her voice and it hurt him to hear it. It seemed that Thornwich had left his sister to manage the estate, which did not come as a huge surprise to Nick.

He tapped lightly on the door but did not wait for permission and simply entered. She looked up at him, surprise evident on her features. He smiled, hoping to set her at ease but her surprise turned into an unwelcoming scowl.

“Mr Brown, how much money do you need to fix the roofs of the tenants’ houses?”

“Most of the houses need some kind of repair, my lord, and I have men to pay. I do not work alone.”

“How much?”

“Really? This is too much,” butted in Lady Gabriella. Nick raised a hand and surprisingly she stopped speaking. Gabriella had never been one to keep her mouth shut when she had something to say. Even as a child she’d been precocious, regularly getting in trouble with her nanny for being far too forthcoming for a young lady.

“Fifty pounds.”

“Fifty?”

“Aye, like I said, most roofs need something done.”

Nick pulled his money purse out of the pocket of his coat. “Thirty pounds now and the rest when you have finished.”

“Seems fair,” said the thatcher. Nick watched him as he accepted the money. The man’s expression didn’t change. His eyes did not light up with greed. This was a fair wage for fair work and both men knew it and so did Gabriella. Out of the corner of his eye, he could practically see the steam coming from the blonde woman’s ears. She was enraged by him but good manners prevented her from saying anything.

“I expect good work for my money, Brown. If I hear you’ve cheated Lady Gabriella...”

“I promise, my lord, you will not find fault in my work.” The man pocketed his money, bowed to both Gabriella and Nick and hurried out of the room.

Gabriella waited until the man was walking back up the private road to the village before she rounded on Nick.

“Of all the high-handed, boorish, rude, obnoxious...”

Again, Nick raised his hand and good breeding prevented her from saying more. He turned and closed the door.

“I think we need some privacy,” he said simply.

“Open the door at once, you brute. It is not proper for you and me to be alone together.”

“Hush, my lady. Please do not give yourself a fit of the vapours. I plan to marry you anyway.”

Gabriella clasped a hand over her cleavage, grabbing a hold on the desk to steady herself. Her face was ashen and her mouth gaped before she gathered her wits enough to stutter out a couple of words.

“You... do?”

“I do,” he said firmly. He had wanted to woo her and convince her to marry him when he had first set out on this wager but he had a feeling that Gabriella would prefer honesty and he was going to be brutally honest.

“And do I have a choice?” Her lips were set in a thin line and her

brow was furrowed, her gaze rather ferocious for a young lady of good breeding. Two spots of dark colour on her cheeks showed her displeasure at the turn of events.

“Not really. You see, there is a wager in the betting book at White’s Gentlemen’s Club which says that I will not be married to you by Christmas. The wager was made by the Earl of Thornwich.” Gabriella’s mouth had dropped open in shock. “I wagered that I would be married to you by Christmas. There is ten thousand pounds resting on the outcome of it.”

“Pardon!” Her voice had risen almost to a screech and she looked around as if hoping for some other escape from the study but of course, there was none. “Joseph does not have ten thousand pounds. What do you think that discussion with the thatcher was about?”

“No, it appears that he does not.”

“Why would you do that? Why would you wager someone else’s life in such a cavalier manner? I understand that women are naught but property but...” her voice trailed off, hurt and bewilderment now evident in her expression. He felt like a cad.

“I was foxed. I know it is no excuse. I did not think that Thornwich would actually go through with it and then I realised the joke was on you as much as on me. He was setting us both up to fail. It may not mean much to you, Lady Gabriella, but honour demanded that I accept the bet once the challenge was issued. Had I tried to weasel out of it, well... gentlemen can be cruel and I would not have been the one to whom their cruelty nor to whom the wagging tongues of the Beau Monde would have been directed. ”

“So you agreed this wager to protect me?” Gabriella pushed at a curl of hair that had come free from the severe knot of her coiffure. “I do not believe you, my lord. You are as selfish and cruel as is my brother.” She made a move towards the door but he blocked her way.

“Please, Gabby, wait! Listen to me. I thought about this last night. I considered whether I should just seduce you and claim a love match or if I should tell you the truth. I chose the truth because I believe you deserve to know. Friendship and love can grow. We come from a society that expects arranged marriages. From what little I have seen of you today and yesterday, I have the utmost respect for you and you are quite lovely. I see no reason for a marriage not to work. Please, let us try.”

“My lord, I have not given you leave to make free with my given name, let alone a pet name none but my dearest friends use.”

“We used to be friends,” he persisted. He would not feel bad for calling her by the name she used to insist that he use.

“Not anymore. I am no longer a child of twelve, Lord Eastden.”

His gaze swept up her slender body, over the perfectly respectable

lavender muslin day gown until it rested on her bosom. He had accepted his fate and it was not an unpleasant one. Ever since he had agreed the wager, his mind had shifted to the inevitability of bedding Gabriella. And he was eager to do so—when the time was right. His mouth was dry and he licked his lips as he imagined peeling the dress off, untying her stays and weighing those perfect globes in his hands.

“No, Lady Gabriella, you are most definitely not a child anymore.”



No one had ever looked at Gabriella like that before. Nicholas—

Lord Eastden looked like a cat readying itself to pounce on a mouse. His gaze seemed transfixed on her breasts and it made her feel uncomfortable and yet... it also made her feel beautiful and wanted. She shook her head. What a ridiculous idea. She was ugly. He had said so himself.

He dragged his gaze back up to her face and for a moment she dared to believe that he had changed his mind. There was no look of revulsion or disdain in his features. His eyes were hooded and, again, he licked his lips. That pink tongue sent her insides fluttering like birds.

“You know it makes sense, Gabby. You need a husband, I need a wife. Then when Thornwich admits to being unable to pay his end of the wager, we can force him to take on a man of business to run the estates, under the threat of me calling in his debt.”

“He does not need a man of business. I run the estate perfectly well.”

“I have just been out riding and I agree, you are doing a marvellous job, but Thornwich remains in control and makes stupid wagers with money you need to improve the lives of your tenants and estate workers. You are powerless to stop him from wasting money.”

“I...” She was confused and tired and unsettled by the goings on over the past day. He spoke sense but she was not ready to relinquish control yet. “I shall pay you back as soon as we have sold this year’s lambs.”

“And what of next year, Gabby? What of the year after? Even if I lose and have to give your brother ten thousand pounds, how much of that do you think you shall see for repairs and other estate matters?”

Gabriella sighed. He was correct, of course but marrying him was a rather drastic step.

What he had said before made sense. Perhaps love and devotion could grow. He was certainly a very attractive man.

"I am not sure," she said weakly, knowing she must gain some time to consider the matter properly. Of course, she'd had no other offers—ever—and he was a respectable gentleman with a good title and money. She would be a fool to turn him down. He moved close to her... even closer than if they were waltzing in Almack's and she was forced to raise her eyes to meet his dark brown gaze. Her heart seemed to miss a beat as he moved his mouth tantalisingly close to hers.

"If I need to seduce you, Lady Gabriella, I am up to the task."

"You would force yourself upon me?" she said, aghast. He chuckled and placed his hand under her chin.

"No, my love. I have never yet had to force a woman into my bed. I am not about to start now. When you come to my bed, you shall come willingly... oh, so willingly, Gabby." He touched his nose to hers and she thought she may get her first kiss. Her heart felt like it was thudding right out of her chest and she had the urge to press her body closer to his. She wanted to feel those taut muscles against her softer curves. But then he straightened, backed towards the door, turned the knob and bowed.

"Think about it, my lady," he said before he turned and walked out.

Gabriella allowed her bottom to rest fully on the desk as she drew in a long, slow breath. She didn't know what to think. Once upon a time, Nick had been the centre of her world. They had been the best of friends, slaying dragons, sailing the seven seas, exploring the new world and sometimes even playing house when Gabriella whined enough and Nick was in the mood to cave in to her demands. Then he had hurt her and she'd not seen him again, bar a few glimpses at balls during her fruitless London Seasons.

Now here he was with a proposal of marriage and a devastating smile that caused her stomach to knot and her breath to hitch. Oh dear, she was just so confused.



Nick lay in bed, tossing and turning and running over in his mind how to convince Gabriella to marry him. He could not help but think she had been tempted by his bold, honest proposition. Gabriella

had always been a sensible chit and she was getting on in years. She appeared to have no other marriage prospects and his proposal did make financial sense. However, she was a female and despite some of them claiming to be practical and pragmatic, he suspected most ladies wanted romance too.

He turned onto his side, pulling the blankets over his shoulders. His mind filled with imaginings of Gabriella lying on a pillow, her hair splayed out over it, her lips swollen from his kisses and the skin on her chest and breasts scraped by his day beard. He tried to push the thoughts away. It wouldn't do for him to have to tamp down his frustrations again and he was growing hard again at the thought of her.

She had taunted him all evening with her low-cut neckline, the long eyelashes she had batted whenever he caught her gaze and the arse which teased and tempted as she walked.

They had not discussed their earlier conversation at all during the day or during dinner and the ensuing game of cards but Nick knew she was considering it. How to push her to the next stage, though? She was an innocent, so seducing her would have to be done carefully so as not to frighten her.

He flung himself onto his back. This was no good. He couldn't get her out of his mind and sleep was not going to happen at this rate. He needed a plan and in order to formulate one, he needed some exercise. He threw the covers off, marched over to the chair and hauled on the breeches he had worn the day before. It was a full moon outside, the perfect weather for a middle of the night walk.



Gabriella sat on the large seat at her bedroom window, watching

a fox sniff the frozen ground in search of food. The poor thing would find nothing to eat around the old manor house. The weather had been crisp and cold for days now and the ground was rock hard.

The fox raised its head, listened for a moment and then fled. Gabriella lifted her eyebrow, wondering what could have frightened the creature. A figure appeared in the silvery light of moon, hunched up against the cold, but unmistakeably Viscount Eastden. Unfortunately, his greatcoat covered up his lean, muscular form, but she still had memories of him striding into her office, his breeches stretched over his thighs, showing off every muscle and sinew and

causing her to blush and feel altogether too warm.

What was he doing and why was he walking out of doors in the middle of the night on a freezing December night?

She pulled her blanket around her shoulders. Could she really marry this man? And would he really try to seduce her? Excitement and fear wended their way through her and she shivered despite the heavy woollen blanket.

Nicholas was now out of sight but she contemplated life with him. She had heard he was a rake and a libertine but he was still popular among the mamas of the *ton* as he was heir to a very wealthy earldom and because it seemed he did not debauch innocents or cause scandals. Did Gabriella want Nick to seduce her? It was a question she had yet to consider. After all, he intended to marry her so she would not be ruined if he succeeded.

For the first time Gabriella wondered how much of his reputation Viscount Eastden deserved. Was he just a man with healthy male appetites or was he mad, bad and dangerous to know, in the same way Lord Byron was? Gabriella chuckled to herself. Nick was definitely not as scandalous as the poet. Of that she was sure.

She did not see that she had much choice. If she did not marry him, then her family was financially ruined, even with his ten thousand pound wager. And she would still be unmarried, ugly and poor.

Her brother was never going to change. He had always been rather feckless and while he was not evil, their father had never really been firm with him. Their mother had doted on him and then both their parents had died when Gabriella was just fourteen and Joseph sixteen. Just a boy, really. Their drunkard of an uncle had done the absolute minimum necessary as their guardian until Joseph came of age then just over a year ago Joseph had married Edna.

It seemed that Edna had taken a dislike to Gabriella from the start and Gabriella knew not why. Was it the easy camaraderie she had with the servants, most of whom she'd known from childhood or was it something else? Did Edna think Joseph had spent too much money on Gabriella's fruitless seasons in London trying in vain to find a suitor?

Returning her mind to the question at hand, she thought about reasons not to marry Lord Eastden. Truth be told, she could think of few but there was hardly a queue of suitors outside her door. Marrying Lord Eastden may be her only escape from a life of doing her brother's bidding. Perhaps it was time for Lady Gabriella Seymour to look after Lady Gabriella Seymour and damn the consequences.

Chapter 4

“D id you have a nice walk last night?” Lady Gabriella said as

she spread jam over her toast the next morning. Only Nick and Gabriella had so far come down to breakfast. It seemed the earl and countess still preferred London hours, even while in the country.

“Last night?”

“Yes, I saw you walking across the east lawn, sometime around two o’clock.”

He raised an eyebrow and lifted his coffee. Had she been spying on him? Oh, he liked the idea of that immensely.

“Pray tell how you were aware of my movements at such an ungodly hour?”

“My bedchamber overlooks the east lawn and I was watching out of the window. I could not sleep. You scared off a fox.”

“Yes, I saw the fox,” he mused, storing away the snippet of information about where her bedchamber was in relation to the rest of the sprawling manor. “Why could you not sleep? Was it because of my proposition?”

She lifted her gaze to his. Intense brown eyes surveyed him, her blonde brows furrowed and her luscious lips pursed.

“We shall marry on Christmas Eve. I assume you will arrange a special licence from the Bishop?” she enquired after a moment or two.

“Um, yes. Yes, of course.” He could not quite believe his ears. She was saying yes with nary a question. His chest was bursting with pride and hope. He actually felt happy. “I will take good care of you, Gabby. I promise.”

“Good.” She nodded. “And it’s Gabriella to you.” With that she stood and swept out of the room.



Gabriella patted the nose of Snowy, her white mare. The horse

nickered and munched on a piece of carrot that Gabriella had acquired from the kitchen. Snowy was Gabriella's only companion other than Mrs McAllister. The horse understood her moods and temperament as much as any human being could.

"I know, my beauty. You want to gallop too but it is too icy to take such a risk. We shall instead trot into the village to see the vicar and the ladies of the Christmas fete organising committee. No doubt the children shall pet you and feed you grass and thoroughly spoil you, so don't feel too bad."

The horse snorted as Gabriella patted its neck.

"Is this a private trip into the village or can anyone join?"

Gabriella started but recovered almost instantly, turning around to meet the dark gaze of Lord Eastden.

"My lord, you startled me," she chastised, her gaze resting on his muscled thighs beneath the form-fitting pantaloons. She still could not quite believe she had agreed to wed such a fine specimen of manhood. Of course, it was still a bit of a shock she had agreed to marry the boy who had called her ugly. Did he still think her birthmark ugly? Could he now just ignore it?

His greatcoat was open and she envied him the warm woollen garment. Why did women's clothes have to be pretty rather than practical? She was already cold despite her long woollen pelisse and fur-lined bonnet.

"I apologise, but may I join you? I believe it would be worthwhile for us to spend time together and get to know one another."

"I shall be busy in the village. There is the church nativity scene to attend to, the vicar to meet to discuss the Christmas services and the village festivities to arrange. I am afraid you shall find it dreadfully tedious."

He smiled and chuckled.

"I have business with the vicar myself. I believe he will have an extra service to perform on the morning of Christmas Eve." Her brown eyes widened and her colour rose. He seemed to study her for a moment. "Are you having second thoughts, Gabriella? Your answer seems to have been rather hasty and much though I want you to marry me, I want you to be happy about it."

She sighed and turned around to face him properly.

"My lord..."

"Nick."

"Nick, then. I am marrying you because I want to get away from

my brother and my sister-in-law and no longer be a burden to them. I am also marrying you because you asked and no one else is likely to come begging for my hand. It is a young lady's sole purpose in life to marry well and produce heirs for her husband. You shall be an earl one day. That is much more than I could have ever hoped for. I have no doubt that this will be a typical arranged *ton* marriage. We shall see each other two or three times a year once you have an heir and a spare and you shall keep lovers and mistresses. Everyone will look on in pity, thinking that I am none the wiser even though I shall know every woman whose bed you warm and I shall be fine because that is what is expected of ladies. Let us not lie to ourselves and pretend this is a love match."

Her little speech seemed to rock him back on his heels. She watched his Adam's apple move up and down his throat as he swallowed, a frown marring those perfect features. He whacked his riding crop against his booted foot and then he removed his hat and speared his fingers through his dark curls, consternation plain on his features.

"Do you not feel anything for me? Not even...I don't know... attraction?"

Attraction? Of course she felt attracted to him. He was like a Greek god.

"You are very handsome," she conceded. "Everyone will know that you only married me because of a bet. After all, no one wanted me before the wager, did they?" The groom appeared at that moment. "Jones, can you help me onto Snowy?"

"Yes, my lady."

"No! Allow me."

In three long strides, her betrothed was at her side, his hands on her waist, ready to lift her onto the horse but before he did, he leaned his head close, his lips near her ear.

"There will be no other lovers or mistresses, my darling. We shall live together, both in town and in the country, and you shall be head over ears in love with me by the time you say, 'I do.'"



Nick unceremoniously dumped two wooden wise men on the floor of the sanctuary of Thornwich Parish Church as Gabriella hurried through the door of the church.

“Oh Nick, you got the whole nativity set out of the cupboard. Oh, you are a dear.” Her cheeks were pink from the cold and she plucked off her gloves as she rushed down the aisle. His heart leapt at the sight of her. “The vicar’s wife wanted to talk about the Christmas Eve service. I couldn’t get away.” She untied her bonnet and left it and her gloves on a pew before removing her warm pelisse and approaching the altar.

“I only have a couple of pieces left to retrieve,” Nick said, indicating the wooden statuettes.

“Thank you...” she began but he waved away her words and headed back into the dark and dusty cupboard inside the vestry to collect the last parts of the nativity. The dust was making him sneeze, his buff pantaloons were filthy and had a hand mark on his thigh and he was absolutely positive there were still cobwebs clinging to his hair.

He was pleased, however, that he had accompanied her. She would have struggled to pull the heavy figurines out of the cupboard to be cleaned and set out for next week’s service. Besides, it would have taken her a lot longer.

There was only the crib and the baby Jesus to go. When he picked up the crib, he realised it was broken. The lengthwise piece of wood that ensured the wooden saviour would not fall out had been snapped, more than likely by accident. There were all manner of things in the cupboard and Nick did not imagine that anyone had damaged the crib on purpose.

Feeling that it would be somewhat irreverent for him to drop the baby Jesus out of the crib while moving it, he lifted the wooden infant from its crib and cradled it, much as he had cradled his cousin’s children. This baby was much quieter and did not squirm about ferociously as the twins had. Though to be fair, it was quite a bit smaller than his baby second cousins had been.

He picked up the crib in his spare hand and marched back into the main part of the church to find Gabriella sitting between Mary and Joseph, dusting off the virgin. Gabriella looked up, smiling. Again his heart flipped. Damn her, he really was falling for the chit.

“I am afraid the crib seems to have met with some sort of accident sometime during the year.” He held up the damaged item but Gabriella seemed to be uninterested. Her gaze was transfixed on the baby Jesus he was cradling gently. “Don’t worry, there is only minor damage and the baby Jesus seems to be fine,” he said, smiling and trying in vain to understand the strange look that seemed to have come over the face of his companion.

She seemed wistful. How odd. He looked down at his wooden bundle and scowled. Did she just really like Christmas and go all

sentimental at any baby Jesus or was it just the woman thing of squealing and cooing over babies, even the pretend ones? He shook his head. Ladies really were a mystery.

"If I can get some wood, nails and a hammer I can fix it easily enough," he offered.

"What? Oh, pardon. Yes. Well, you could try the vicarage. The vicar will be out on his rounds but I am sure Mrs Roberts will be able to find the vicar's tools. He's quite handy and fixes a lot of things around the parish."

He placed the crib on the floor and handed the baby Jesus to Gabriella. She cradled it the way he had, wiping her cleaning cloth over its head as if soothing the wooden child. He wanted to snort.

"A vicar who knows how to mend things, eh? Whatever next?"

"I know," she said grinning. "Almost as unlikely as a viscount who knows how to wield a hammer and nails."

He grinned back, executed a slight bow and caught her gaze. "Touché, my love."

She blushed. He grinned even wider.

He hurried out the church in search of tools. Yes, this had been an excellent idea for an outing. Gabriella was more relaxed and was genuinely happy. He could sense it and he knew she had appreciated his help. He had also enjoyed the sight of her riding her horse. She was a capable horsewoman, graceful in the saddle and fully in control of her mount at all times. He never failed to be amazed how women could ride so well on those ridiculous side saddles.

The day had confirmed to him that asking Gabriella to marry him was a good idea. They would do well together. She was biddable but had a fire that would keep him on his toes. She was not meek and mild. That would never do. She may be willing to sail the seven seas with him but every so often she would still force him to play house, just as it had been in the old days. He suppressed a chuckle at the thought.

Chapter 5

“G ood grief, Gabs, have you nothing better to wear to dinner

when we have a guest?” moaned Edna, her lip curling into a sneer. Gabriella cursed the heat rising in her cheeks as she looked up defiantly into Edna’s glinting black eyes.

“No, I do not. My brother has stopped my pin money because he cannot afford it.” Of course, Edna already knew. In fact, Gabriella knew that Edna had been the one to suggest it to Joseph. Her brother had made an unconvincing protest about it being a tad unfair but alas, her brother was a weak man and a woman like Edna had him wrapped around her little finger.

A footstep in the doorway to the drawing room made her flush deeper. Had Lord Eastden heard that? She hoped not. Though if he had, at least he would understand why her only silk dress had been mended so many times and looked so drab and unfashionable. She did not want him thinking that she spoke ill of her brother even when all she uttered was the truth.

Joseph came in a second or two after Lord Eastden. His gaze quickly assessed her attire and he frowned, curling his lip.

How dare he? It was his fault she had no decent gowns.

She stood up, prepared to offer their guest a drink before dinner but Edna spoke to Lord Eastden before she had the chance.

“My lord, I must introduce you to my young cousin, Lady Arabella Foxdean, when next we are in company together. I believe you would be enchanted by her and, much though I hate to sound like an interfering female relative, I do believe you would make a good match. She is the daughter of a duke, you know.”

Lord Eastden nodded solemnly as if giving the idea due consideration. “I would imagine your cousin is as delightful as you are, Lady Thornwich, and in other circumstances I would be delighted to pay court to Lady Arabella but alas, my heart has been captured by another.”

“My dear Lord Eastden,” Edna trilled, her lips turning up in what Gabriella assumed passed for a smile from her sister by marriage. Not that she saw Edna smile. “It is time to forget Lady Angela, for she is now the Duchess of Hawkhill. I never took you for being the type of gentleman to remain broken-hearted for long.”

Lord Eastden seemed to suck a breath in through his teeth before turning a dazzling smile which did not quite reach his eyes, to her sister-in-law.

“*My dear* Lady Thornwich, while I am sure the society gossip column in your chosen scandal sheet was correct that early in the spring I did pay court to the current Duchess of Hawkhill, I assure you that I am neither heartbroken nor hankering after that particular lady.” With that he turned to Gabriella and took her hand in his.

Neither of them wore gloves and the warmth of his fingers wrapping lightly around hers sent a bolt of awareness through her body. His gaze met hers and now the smile did meet his eyes. “Gabriella, my love, I appreciate that our courtship has been short, to say the least, but it is my opinion that we shall be well-suited and that love can grow between us. I have always had a deep affection for you since our childhood and believe we will rub along well together. Thus I would be delighted if you would consent to be my wife. Gabby, will you marry me?”

Gabriella could not quite believe her ears. He was staring at her intently as Edna coughed and spluttered her upset at the turn of events. That in itself was almost worth getting married for. Lord Eastden squeezed her fingers lightly and his intent gaze became a look of pleading as the moments ticked by. Gabriella realised she’d just been standing, dumbfounded. A quick glance at Edna, who seemed to be recovering, told Gabriella that Edna thought she was about to refuse.

She could not make him look a fool and if she tarried any longer, that was exactly how he would look. She would appear to be about to refuse his suit.

“Yes, my lord, I would be honoured to marry you. I accept your proposal.” She looked into the brown depths of his eyes. He grinned and dropped one of her hands to ferret in his pocket, producing a small box. He opened it. Lying on a little cushion was a ring—a beautiful ring with a gold band, one large diamond in the centre and surrounded by small rubies.

“I apologise that it is not new. It was my grandmother’s and she gave it to me, telling me to give it to my wife when I eventually settled down. She died during my first term at Eton.”

“I remember,” Gabriella said softly. She did remember the old dowager countess with her ugly wig, ear horn and toothless grin. She

had never complained about children and always had a little bowl of sweets, which she handed out at regular intervals to the children. Gabriella had loved going to the Chetfern estate as a child and now she looked down at the late Countess of Chetfern's ring and sadness washed over her.

She extended her hand and Lord Eastden slipped it onto her ring finger. It fitted perfectly and Gabriella moved her hand to inspect it and delighted in the way it sparkled off the candlelight.

"Thank you, my lord," Gabriella managed as Lord Eastden lowered his face towards hers and pressed his lips softly and chastely to hers before drawing away.

"Time you started calling me Nick again, I think," he whispered just before he straightened.

At that moment the gong sounded for dinner and Gabriella accepted Nick's proffered arm, wrapping her fingers around his coat sleeve. Her legs felt like jelly and her head was swirling. Was she really going to marry Lord Eastden, heir to the Earldom of Chetfern?

Edna certainly looked none too happy about the turn of events and her brother was scowling furiously. It seemed he had just lost his wager.



“G
abriella!” Nick’s voice rang out through the large hallway

as Gabriella began to ascend the stairs having bid everyone goodnight. She wasn’t particularly tired but she could read for a few hours rather than suffering the company of her brother and his wife. She felt a little bad leaving Nick to fend for himself but he could do as she had done if he had a mind to.

She turned and watched him bound up the stairs two at a time until he reached her. His dark blue coat, light blue satin waistcoat and satin knee breeches made her bite her lip. He had good taste in clothes, a fashionable hairstyle and his personality had definitely improved from the twelve-year-old boy who had called her ugly.

“How can I help you, Nick?”

“You could let me walk you to your room.” Her eyes widened in horror and he chuckled. “Only to the door of your bedchamber. I shall not be claiming my conjugal rights tonight.” His gaze flicked down to her breasts and he licked his lips before lifting it back to hers. Heat burned in her cheeks and warmth spread through her to her most

intimate place. Was she wanton? She wanted him to kiss her, to touch her, to want her. Having explored her own body a little in the dark nights under her bed sheets, she had some idea of where she wanted him to touch her. She licked her own lips. "I would like to claim a kiss, however."

"What if someone sees?" she hissed.

"Then we shall be forced to marry. I do not see why that would be a problem since you have agreed to marry me already."

He offered her his arm and she took it, smiling shyly as he guided her up the rest of the wide sweeping staircase.

"The ring is beautiful," Gabriella started, feeling the need to fill the long silence as they walked.

"I am glad you like it. I know it is all rather rushed but I meant what I said. I think we shall suit rather nicely."

"I hope I can be a good wife to you and I promise I will not make a fuss about not attending balls and parties. I can understand why no man would want me on his arm. I am very good at blending into the background, despite this." She lifted her hand to her cheek and the ugly strawberry birthmark which marred her appearance so.

Nick turned and stared at her. They had begun to walk along the hallway that led to where her suite of rooms was situated.

"Devil take it, Gabby! Where in God's name did you get the notion that I would be embarrassed to have you on my arm? I don't give a fig about... about... about a god-damned birthmark. I have a mole behind my left knee. It's about the size of a gold sovereign. I hope you shall think none the less of me for that."

His dark eyes blazed as his arms thrashed about during his little speech. She blinked rapidly, not understanding his ire. Tears welled in her eyes and she bit her lip. How many times as a child had she tried to wash the darkened skin away? She leaned against the wall to place distance between them.

"But you think I'm ugly and I understand... I do..." she started.

"I do *not* think you are ugly. Whatever gave you such a ridiculous idea?"

"You did. You said I was ugly."

"When? When did I say you were ugly?"

"The summer after your first year at Eton. You came here and I would not allow you to play with the puppy the stable master had given me. You were too rough and he was just a baby and besides, you had not written to me like you had promised and I was hurt. You said I was ugly and would end up an old spinster. You said no one would want to marry a girl who looked like she had strawberry jam all over her face." Gabriella blinked back the tears. She would not cry in front of him. Let him try to wriggle out of his cruel words.

Nick's mouth dropped open and he stared at her, understanding dawning as the memories came to the fore. "Oh my God. So I did. I remember now."

"I think our parents quarrelled over it because neither you nor your family ever came back to Thornwich and we never visited Chetfern estate again."

"They did." His voice was quiet—his tone sombre. "I remember now my father using his switch on my derriere and telling me to learn to respect ladies. He gave me an almighty lecture about how appearances were immaterial and my ugly taunts were a bigger disgrace to my family than any birthmark could ever be."

"But your father was wrong, Nick. Appearances do matter. I'm not such a bad sort. I'm relatively easy to get along with, intelligent enough to hold a conversation without having to only discuss hair ribbons and bonnets and yet no one has ever asked me to waltz apart from the gentleman who was picked out for me by the patronesses of Almack's during my come out season. Not one gentleman, Nick. So you see, appearances do matter and so do birthmarks."

"I will not make excuses for my behaviour that day, Gabriella, except to say that I did not mean the hurtful things I said. I was a stupid, thoughtless, callow youth. I was annoyed at you for not allowing me to play with the puppy and I struck out. I was cruel and picked on something that was an easy target. What I said was mean and absolutely not true. Gabby, you are beautiful and clever and strong and..."

His gaze raked over her face as his tongue darted out to lick his lower lip. He took a step forward, effectively pinning her against the wall.

"Nick," she breathed, her hands coming up instinctively to rest on the shoulders of his woollen coat.

"Gabby," he all but growled as he placed his lips over hers. They were softer than she had ever imagined a man's lips would be and he coaxed her to follow his lead, massaging his lips against hers, relaxed but enticing.

She copied him, enjoying the rising excitement in her belly. He pushed his fingers into her coiffure as he splayed his other hand across the small of her back and the curve of her bottom. It was almost scandalous but when he moved even closer she could not find the will to ask him to stop. She wanted to know more of him and, at that moment, he pressed his tongue into her mouth.

She made a little whimpering sound at the back of her throat as she surrendered completely to him, spearing her own fingers through his dark curls and rising on her tiptoes to press nearer to him. She began to need him in the same way she needed the air in her lungs.

As he swept his tongue around her mouth one last time, a rumble came from his throat—a rumble that seemed to call to her, calling out to the world that she was his.

His kiss was deeper now, more urgent, and she matched his movements as she ran her free hand over the silk of his waistcoat. He seemed to be very muscular under all those layers of cloth. When her hand slipped onto his stomach he pulled away, catching her hand and pressing her palm against his lips.

Gabriella scowled. Why had he been allowed to have his hand entirely over her bottom but she could not touch him? She had wanted to feel his thighs and his bottom.

“Don’t frown so, Gabby.”

“I did something wrong?” she enquired.

“No, far from it, but here is not the place for explorations of that nature.”

“But you had your hand on my...” She could not say the word. Her cheeks burned and she now just wanted to escape from his penetrating gaze.

“I did and I apologise. I was carried away by the moment and by the taste of your sweet lips on mine.” She gave him a sceptical look. Was this the kind of thing men said to entice women to their beds? He chuckled. “My apologies for I am no Lord Byron,” he admitted.

“Considering the gossip even I have heard from London, that is no bad thing, Lord Eastden. Though, I cannot for the life of me understand exactly what it is he is said to have done to his wife.”

“Well, my darling Gabriella, I shall not be enlightening you any time soon. Perhaps when you are a married lady I can give you a general explanation of what he has done to scandalise society so. I have brought enough scandal on you by wagering that I could marry you by Christmas.”

“Yes. I do not think my brother and sister-in-law are at all pleased.”

“No, but let us not talk of them. There was something I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh?” Her curiosity was piqued.

“Will you come to Chetfern Estate tomorrow to see my parents? I want to tell them the good news and let them meet you again now you are an adult. I can ask your brother to borrow his carriage or we could ride there. It shall only take an hour or so.”

“Riding will be better. Joseph may not be keen to lend his carriage to the man to whom he shall soon owe ten thousand pounds.”

“I shall not take the money from him,” he assured her. “Or if he insists, I shall insist on him paying in small instalments.”

“That is more than he deserves. Shall we depart straight after

breakfast?"

"Yes."

"I shall see you in the morning." They had reached her door now.

"I look forward to it." He bent down and kissed her lightly on the lips, his hand coming up to touch her cheek with the birthmark. When he straightened, his hand lingered and Gabriella could feel her embarrassment rising. "My parents tell me that love grows between a man and a woman after they are married. Until I met you again, I was not convinced they were correct but with you, I see it as a distinct probability." Then he kissed her forehead, turned down the hall and strode away from her.

Chapter 6

Nick squinted at his bride-to-be, sitting proudly atop her snowy white mare, manoeuvring the beast with ease over the uneven ground. He was beginning to think travelling round by the road had been the less sensible option since the hard frozen ground had deep ruts which made it difficult for both horses to walk easily. As a result, they travelled in single file along the centre of the track, the horses walking more easily over the frosty grass that carriage wheels never touched.

She looked back and smiled, her position on the side-saddle making it much easier for her than it would be for him.

“Are you well? We’re nearly there.”

“Yes, I know. I recognise this bit of road.”

A quarter of an hour later they were drawing their horses to a stop at the front of the blond sandstone mansion. The old abbey, which had been the country home of most of Nick’s ancestors, had been pulled down in the middle of the last century and this newer building had been erected in its place. It had only been completed in Nick’s grandfather’s time.

A groom came hurrying up to take the horses and Nick slid quickly off his horse before placing his hands on Gabriella’s waist, lifting her off her mare. The groom hurried away but Nick did not remove his hands. He bent so Gabriella was forced to lift her head to meet his gaze from beneath her bonnet.

He scowled at the frivolous item of clothing that did nothing to keep the poor thing warm. How much lace and trimmings were on the damned thing and how much was needed? Did any of it make a woman look good? Yet somehow, on Gabriella, it all looked utterly feminine and adorable.

“Thank you for coming,” he said brusquely before pressing a chaste kiss to her lips.

“You are welcome but I think you should let me go or even your servants will talk.”

“Let them. You shall be Lady Eastden soon—a viscountess—my viscountess.”

She smiled at him then—a shy smile that warmed his heart. Was she worried about the wedding night? Was it that aspect of marriage to him that had caused her cheeks to turn such a delightful shade of pink?

Suddenly the big oak door opened and the butler stood in the entryway.

“Rogers, nice to see you again.”

“My lord.” The butler bowed low then looked questioningly at Nick for some help as to how to address his guest. However, as Roger’s glanced at the woman beside him, recognition lit his eyes and his hand moved upwards slightly as if he was moving it towards his face, then he remembered himself. “Lady Gabriella. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Gabriella’s hand flew to her cheek and Nick glowered at the aging man.

“Please announce us to the earl and countess, Rogers,” Nick said, his tone more brusque than usual. He had been brought up to be polite to servants and to treat them well but he was not happy with Rogers at this moment in time.

“Of course, your lordship. If I may take your outdoor clothing then I shall show you to the blue drawing room.”

Nick helped Gabriella out of her thick woollen pelisse and removed his own greatcoat. He gave the butler his gloves and hat, as did Gabriella before they followed the old man to the first floor main drawing room for accepting guests. Nick motioned to a chaise, on which she perched her pert bottom, her back ramrod straight and her hands clasped delicately in her lap. She was the perfect lady and suddenly Nick had a number of visions of her doing some very unladylike things in a very unladylike state of dishabille on that very chaise.

Nick sat beside her. As he was trying to think of a polite topic of conversation, his mother appeared in the doorway. She glanced at him then looked to their guest.

“Lady Gabriella, it is wonderful to see you again after all this time.” She came forward and clasped his betrothed’s hands. Gabriella’s features broke into a warm smile as she squeezed the countesses fingers then found herself enveloped in a hug. His mother then took her hands again.

“I am sorry, my dear. I am just so delighted to see you. I wanted so very much to come and check you were well when your parents passed but I fear our quarrel had left deep wounds. I hope you can forgive the earl and myself.”

“Of course. There is nothing to forgive. Please, my lady, think no more on it.”

The countess's eyes sparkled with unshed tears. They were saved from any further uncomfortable discussion by the arrival of Nick's father. What little hair the man had left came out in unruly silver tufts above his ears. His brown eyes, the mirror of Nick's own eyes, glinted as he took in the scene.

“Gabriella, my dear, it is a delight to see you again. Time that blaggard of a son of mine did some fence mending between our families. How are you, boy? Still being a wastrel?”

“Well...” Nick started but stopped as his mother hurried over to the bell pull.

“We must have tea.”

Nick rolled his eyes. Tea could wait a few minutes, surely. Apparently not. Five minutes later tea was served and Nick was more nervous than he had been since his days in Eton when he had not practiced his Greek noun declensions and would have to suffer the ensuing corporal punishment for his laziness.

“Mother, Father,” he started, taking Gabriella's free hand in his. He noted the chinking of china as the hand holding her cup and saucer shook. “I would like to announce my engagement to Lady Gabriella. We are to be married on Christmas Eve.”

“Christmas Eve?” asked his mother, her expression a mixture of delight and concern. “What is the hurry? Oh Nick, you have not...”

“No, mother, what do you take me for?”

“So Lady Gabriella is not... umm... increasing?” his father put in, rather indelicately. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gabriella's eyes widen.

“Really, Father, if you were any other man, I would call you out for that remark.”

“Adam, that really was not well done of you,” Lady Chetfern remonstrated. “Gabriella, I do apologise for his lordship. He really can be a very rude man on occasions. I would put it down to age but he has always been like this. I fear it is poor breeding. Nicholas, why the hurry?”

Nick blushed. He could not lie to his parents and now they would think him a cad.

“I want to marry at Christmas,” Gabriella blurted out. “It is so romantic. A time of new beginnings with the birth of our Lord and yet the dark nights will give us ample opportunity to get to know each other better.”

The earl's jaw dropped before he lifted his hand and coughed to cover his bark of laughter. Nick noticed his mother pursing her lips to stop herself from looking amused at the unintentional suggestion from

his innocent bride-to-be.

“Quite so,” Nick remarked, slightly disturbed by his parents’ behaviour. He would have expected this from some of his bawdy friends but not his mother.

“Yes, it is rather romantic. I must say, I never realised my son had developed a *tendre* for you, Gabriella, but I am glad that he has. We will be delighted to have you as our daughter-in-law, shall we not, Adam?”

“Oh, of course,” muttered his father, seeming to have come to his senses. “Welcome to the family, my girl,” he added for good measure before turning his attention to his cake.



“I am so glad you agreed to stay for dinner and spend the night

here, Gabriella, my dear,” trilled the countess as the ladies retired to the drawing room while the gentlemen made their way into the library for a brandy. “I asked my maid to leave a brand new chemise and a nightgown out on the bed for you. I’ve assigned Sally, one of the kitchen maids who has attended a few guests, to be your maid while you stay here. If you bring your own maid when you marry...”

“Oh, one of our kitchen maids helps me dress. I do not have a lot of needs as my hair is simply pulled into a knot and my gowns tend to be relatively free of fuss and frills.”

“So I see and what of your trousseau, Gabriella? Has Lady Thornwich offered to take you to London to be fitted for and to choose your trousseau?”

Gabriella swallowed hard. She had no love for Edna but it felt rather dishonourable to explain to Lady Chetfern exactly what her relationship with her sister-in-law was like and that Gabriella would rather dig her eyes out with a spoon than go shopping with the woman.

“I... We... have not yet discussed the matter,” she answered lamely. “The betrothal happened rather quickly and then today we came to visit you.”

“I see. The reason I ask is that... well, my mother-in-law-to-be was the one who took me shopping for my trousseau. My mother had died and I had no siblings, just an aging great aunt. Adam’s mother stepped into the breach, as it were. We actually had quite a jolly time as she was less embarrassed than my poor mother would have been. Given

that you need to choose undergarments and night attire that will... well...that Nicholas will appreciate, it is sometimes easier with ladies to whom you are not so close. Do you think Lady Thornwich would mind awfully if I were to offer to take you to London for a couple of days? I do not have a daughter of my own and part of me would like to turn this into a tradition. Perhaps one day you could do it for your soon-to-be daughter-in-law."

Gabriella could not help thinking that Edna would be delighted to pass this duty off to Lady Chetfern. In fact she doubted very much whether Edna would even think of a trousseau.

"I am sure Lady Thornwich would not mind in the least but I really do not need such frivolous items, my lady. My night attire and undergarments are serviceable." Only Nick would know what dire circumstances her family was in and he only knew because he had been nosy and butted in.

"Nothing frivolous about it. It shall be my wedding gift to you."

"Oh no, Lady Chetfern. I could not possibly..."

The older woman put her hand on Gabriella's and smiled. "I do not wish to be indelicate, my dear, but the gossip around town is that your brother treats you abominably and that he has wagered away the family fortune. And while his circumstances are none of my concern, yours are because they are Nicholas's concern. I...I..." Lady Chetfern's eyes filled with tears. "I never forgave myself for not trying harder to heal the rift between your mother and me after the cruel things that Nicholas said to you that day. An apology now is worthless, Gabriella, but perhaps you will allow me this. A chance to make it up to you. A beautiful young woman like you should have a beautiful gown on your wedding day. Please come to London with me and allow me to make amends."

"My lady, there is no need."

"But there is a need, Gabriella. I will not force you but I would be delighted if you would accept my offer. If you would prefer it, I can always set up the accounts in Nick's name and he can pay for them, since he was the one who wronged you." Her smile was mischievous and Gabriella felt her resolve melting. She could not help thinking that Lady Chetfern was manipulating her, but somehow she did not mind. She was being manipulated for the right reasons.

Gabriella nodded her consent and the countess clapped her hands together in glee.

Gabriella sighed with contentment. She needed some new chemises and nightgowns. Her old ones were rather old and tatty now. Nick deserved a wife to have nice clean, cotton night attire that had not been hemmed so many times he could see her ankles. He would think her completely wanton.



“F

ather, I need you to have a word with Rogers.”

“Oh?” his father raised his eyebrow as he swirled his brandy in its glass and stretched his booted feet out in front of the fire. “Why?”

“When Gabriella and I arrived, he recognised her and called her by name.”

“It’s a butler’s duty to remember faces, Nick. That’s why he’s such a damned good butler and why much as I feel he should be pensioned off by now, I haven’t quite got round to it.”

“But Papa, he remembered her because of her birthmark and she was embarrassed.”

“Did he? Is that what he said? ‘Welcome Lady Gabriella, I would never have recognised you but for the strawberry birthmark on your cheek and nose?’”

“No, but...well he looked like he was about to raise his hand. It was an unconscious gesture, I’m sure, but all the same it made Gabriella uncomfortable.”

“Nick, the girl has not changed an iota since she was twelve years old, apart from the obvious... er... rather delightful enhancements. Had she never had that damned mark, she would still have been recognisable to Rogers since her family was here every month since she was born. Stop trying to offload your guilt about what happened onto my butler.”

“I am not. I accept full responsibility for what happened, as did my backside at the time.”

“Believe me, son, you got off lightly. If not for your mother being soft on you, you would still be locked in the nursery eating gruel. You did a lot of damage with one cruel remark. If Gabriella’s father had wanted justice for his daughter, I could have been staring down the barrel of a pistol at dawn in Hyde Park. Then where would you and your mother have been, eh? Tell me that boy? Ostracised? America? Thank God Thornwich walked away. We could have lost a lot more than the friendship of their family that day, son.”

“I know.” He gulped his brandy. He was sure the only reason he had not remembered was because of the shame he felt. Now it was as clear as day.

His father rubbed his chin and studied him. Nick felt as though he was twelve again and felt absolutely wretched.

“I know that you know, which is why I wonder at your reasons for marrying her. Why dredge up all these horrible memories? Do not

misunderstand me. She is a lovely young woman—accomplished, pretty, clever, demure—but why her, and why now?”

Nick speared his hair with his fingers. He really had to tell the truth.

“Her brother is an ass and so am I. Thornwich and I were in White’s and we were discussing the season and my penchant for a certain lady who is now a duchess. He was goading me and I was foxed. I told him I could marry by Christmas if I chose and he said it sounded like a wager. He wagered me that I could not get Gabriella to marry me by Christmas.” Throughout his speech, his father’s brows had furrowed deeper and deeper. “So I accepted the bet.”

“Devil take it, Nick. What the hell were you thinking? What if she finds out?”

“She already knows.”

His father jerked his head up, his eyes wide. Then he fumbled with his quizzing glass and looked at Nick through it as if Nick was some kind of plant specimen that should be examined.

“You told her?” Nick nodded. “And she accepted?”

“Obviously. I felt like a cad but I could not pull out of the wager. You know what the *ton* is like. Had I refused the wager, they would have found Gabriella wanting. They would have claimed that I could not stomach the idea of marrying her. I had to go through with it for her reputation and because of the circumstances, I thought she deserved the truth.”

“And yet I do not see her hand mark on your face, for you certainly deserve a slap from her!”

“Her brother is almost penniless. When I told her, I had just given the thatcher money to pay for mending the roofs of a number of the tenant’s cottages. It seems that Gabriella is doing the work of a man of business for her brother.”

“I see. I knew that Thornwich has massive gambling debts but I suppose I had never thought much on the impact it would have on Gabriella. It seems our whole family has done that girl a disservice. No matter now. Your mother is in the process of convincing her to come to London with us tomorrow. You may as well come too and you can visit the Archbishop of Canterbury for your special licence. Perhaps there will be a show on at Drury Lane and we can all go. You can stay in your bachelor apartment and Lady Gabriella can stay with your mama and me in the townhouse—for the sake of propriety.”

“Do you think mama can convince her?”

“Ha! Your mama can convince anyone of anything. Look at me. Thirty-two years I have been doing that woman’s bidding and there is no sign of me stopping anytime soon.”

Nick chuckled. His mother certainly was a force to

be reckoned with.

“Perhaps we should rejoin the ladies,” Nick suggested. He could not believe that after just an hour with his father he desperately wanted to see Gabriella again.

“Yes, but Nick, I promise you, if you hurt that young lady ever again, I will switch your arse again—this time until the skin comes off.”

Nick looked at the desk where his father had switched his backside the day he had called Lady Gabriella ugly. He winced at the mere thought.

“I promise, my lord, I would cut out my own heart before I would knowingly hurt her.”

“Good to hear, son. Now stop chastising yourself and let us go and see our lovely ladies.”

“**H**ave you seen this play performed before, my lady?” Nick

asked as he ushered her to their seat in the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.

“No, we studied it at finishing school, but I have never seen a performance of it.”

“I always think it much better to see a play performed at the theatre than to study it from a book, would you not agree?”

“Of course, my lord.”

Nick sat down beside her and awaited his parents’ arrival. He glanced around the boxes opposite and saw rather a large number of ladies talking behind their fans. It was December—who needed a fan in December except to hide what was being said? But then the announcement of his and Gabriella’s engagement had been in this morning’s paper.

“I see we are the topic of most conversations tonight. We seem to have usurped poor Mr Shakespeare.”

“No doubt they are all expecting a happy event for us in seven or eight months,” Gabriella mused.

“Do you think?” Nick asked, astounded and amused by both her forthrightness and her lack of faith in their fellow humans.

“Well, they do not think you are marrying me for my beauty. However, a man may be captivated by my breasts for an evening or two. You certainly look at them often enough.”

“Gabby!”

She grinned at him.

“Do not look so scandalised, my lord. No one can hear. Your parents shall not get away from the Duke of Eckminster for quite some time. We may never see them again, for that matter.”

Nick laughed. “You are incorrigible my lady. If these people knew you as I know you, they would know I was marrying you for your mind and your personality as much as for your beauty and your breasts.”

“Nick!” The countess’s voice behind him made him wince. Devil take it! Why was it that Gabriella could talk about her breasts and not be caught but the moment he said it, his mother overheard. “Really, what an inappropriate subject. Anyone could have overheard you. Lady Gabriella, I do apologise for my son.”

He turned to find his bride-to-be with her own fan in front of her face, her skin beetroot-coloured and her eyes glinting in merriment as she suppressed her laughter. As the curtain rose, Gabriella seemed to calm down. She leaned close to him, her fan raised and whispered, “I believe we are now even for you calling me ugly. Next we must deal with the strawberry jam remark.”

“Touché,” he muttered as he turned his attention to the stage—anything to stop his gaze drifting back to her décolletage. She definitely had a very generous set of breasts which was one of her attributes that seemed to be keeping him awake at nights. He settled back in his seat. He really could not wait until Christmas. Then he could keep her awake at night... all night.



“**W**ould you like a drink?” Nick asked Gabriella as the curtain lowered at the end of Act One.

“I would, thank you.” Nick hurried away after offering a drink to both his parents. She was about to turn to speak to Lady Chetfern when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Gabriella!” She turned to look into the cold gaze of her brother.

“Joseph! How, umm, lovely to see you. How is Lady Thornwich?”

“At home in Thornwich, resting. She is rather overset that your wedding cannot wait until after the baby has been born.”

“The baby is not due until April.”

“Yes, but she is aware that people can tell she is increasing.”

“Of course they can. It is a perfectly natural state, you know.”

“Gabriella, if you cannot say anything kind about my wife, I should prefer you say nothing at all.”

Whenever Gabriella said anything to upset Joseph, he chastised her as though she was a naughty schoolgirl. She gritted her teeth and smiled pleasantly at her brother.

“Did you want to speak to me about anything in particular?”

“Yes, come for a short walk with me.”

She looked around but Nick had not arrived back yet and Lady

Chetfern was involved in a conversation with a lady whom Gabriella was unable to place. She nodded and followed her brother out of the box.

"I feel it is my duty to let you know about a wager between your betrothed and myself," the Earl of Thornwich began. Gabriella tried not to roll her eyes.

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes, you see, I was rather stupid, Gabs, and I was utterly foxed. Eastden and I wagered he could not get you to marry him before Christmas. I know it was awful of me but I saw no harm in it. I thought it was a jest and now I see the announcement in the paper. I feel it is my duty to..."

"Unhand me, woman!" Nick's voice came from behind the door of a box they were passing. She would recognise his deep sound anywhere. "Mmmmm, let me gmmmmm!"

Joseph pulled open the door to reveal Nick and a woman struggling with each other, her lips plastered over his and her hand on his breeches, over his male parts. Joseph looked over his shoulder at Gabriella then shut the door quickly. Angry, hissed words were all Gabriella could hear from behind the door. She could feel the heat of a blush creeping up her cheeks but she swallowed hard and determined not to show any signs of emotion.

"Oh, dear. Well, it does seem as if Lord Eastden is pre-empting your vows with Miss Wainwright," Joseph drawled. "Look, Gabs, tell me you want out of this engagement and I will go in there and tell him you want nothing more to do with him. I shall take you home to the townhouse and tomorrow you'll be back at Thornwich sorting out my ledgers. The scandal will die down by... oh, around 1850, I should think."

"Thank you, Joseph," said Gabriella, turning towards the door of the box as it opened. Clearly the box had been empty and Miss Wainwright and Nick had been hiding behind the heavy curtain which excluded the draughts.

Nick tugged on his waistcoat and smiled slightly at Gabriella.

"Would you like me to accompany you back to my parents, Lady Gabriella?" His cheeks were scarlet but his eyes were dark with pent-up anger.

"Yes, thank you," she said. "Goodbye, Joseph."

Gabriella turned and accepted Nick's outstretched arm, placing her fingers delicately on his sleeve before walking away. Her blood was boiling, but not with Nick and instead with her scheming idiot of a brother. Sadly, Nick was going to have to be collateral damage at least for the next few hours. She forced her face to look impassive and hated the tension she could feel along her betrothed's arm. Her heart

went out to him but she could apologise later.



Devil take it! What on earth had he been thinking? He should have known Miss Abigail Wainwright would be up to no good. She had accosted him as he had hurried to get lemonade for Gabriella, telling him that Lord Thornwich needed to speak to him urgently. He had followed her into the box and she had pounced. He had tried to disentangle himself gently at first but that had been his second mistake. Being a gentleman with the likes of Miss Wainwright was a fool's errand, for she was no lady.

Just as he had decided he needed to be a little rougher to extricate himself from her grasp, the door had opened and Thornwich had been grinning at him. Joseph had then checked that his sister had seen the full horror of the encounter and closed the door.

He had been set up.

"Gabriella," he started but she raised her free hand in a gesture that suggested she did not want to hear excuses. "Please, Gabriella." With her head held high, she made the same gesture again. Perhaps it was best to let her be for now.

They resumed their seats just as the performance was starting again.

At the end of Act Two, Nick was in a terrible state. He had gone over and over the wording of every apology he could think of, every excuse he could make for his downright stupidity and every promise he could make to Gabriella to assure him of his desire to be a faithful husband.

When the curtain lowered this time, Nick's father offered to get the ladies drinks and Lady Chetfern excused herself.

"Gabriella," he said quietly, "that looked very bad but I assure you I was tricked into joining Miss Wainwright in that box. She grabbed me and I tried to be a gentleman and ease myself away from her gently but then you came in and..."

"Nick, please, I beg of you. Speak of it no more for now. Come back to your parents' townhouse after the performance and we will discuss it then."

"No one else is in the box and I need you to understand what was going on."

"Oh Nick, I know very well what was going on. Now here is your

father. Keep the hangdog expression. It is working well.”

Nick frowned at his betrothed. Keep the hangdog expression? It is working well? What in blazes did she mean?

This was going to be a terminable few hours.



Nick followed his betrothed into the blue drawing room of his parents' townhouse, a knot of dread in his stomach. Surely she would at least hear him out and allow him to share his side of the story.

Gabriella turned and gave his mother a reassuring smile. He glanced round to see his mother nod and indicate the doors. Of course they would leave the doors open. Moments later he heard the door to his mother's morning room open. He waited. Gabriella took a seat on a chaise near the fire and indicated he should sit opposite from her.

“Before we start, I owe you an apology,” Gabriella said quietly. Nick was sure his eyebrows had just met his hairline he was so astonished. Why would she think she owed him an apology? “I felt it important you look as uncomfortable and worried about my reaction to the... predicament in which we found you... as possible.”

“Gabriella, I assure you...” But she held her hand up to halt his words again. Frustration was beginning to get the better of him. He huffed out a breath, further annoyed by the fact he suspected he had not made a sound like that since before going to Eton.

“My brother seems to think I am an imbecile. I don't know if he believes this mark on my cheek is a sign that my brain does not work properly, but he has always treated me like a halfwit. I know that you were set up but I did not want him to know his ploy had not worked out.”

“You knew?” A mixture of relief and irritation washed over him. He'd been at that theatre for four hours contemplating his fate, wishing he too could have died at the hands of Brutus, only for her to tell him that she knew he had been set up.

“Of course I knew. No one organises a secret tryst at the theatre. It's far too open and public. Anyway, even if you were having an affair, you are far too much of a gentleman to be caught in a compromising situation with your mistress. You would have a house for her and you would bed her there and you would make sure you did your best to keep it a secret from me.”

He sighed. “I would not have a mistress. Gabby, I want our

marriage to work. I have no interest in the Miss Wainwrights of this world. She offers every man her favours and though few resist her, she is not respected by them.”

“Perhaps Joseph would have got away with it if he had not used his own mistress in his plan. That was rather stupid of him,” she mused almost to herself.

“You knew she was his mistress.”

Gabriella rolled her eyes. “The whole of the *ton* know Miss Wainwright is his mistress. Even Edna knows.” He nodded. “Has she ever been your mistress?”

Her question seemed to hit him in the chest. Like a cricket ball coming in from a fielder that one had not anticipated.

“Not as such.”

“Not as such?”

“We did...” he made a rolling motion with his hand. “About three years ago. One night. I... well, I was a little foxed and well... men have needs.”

She nodded. “I should not have asked. It is bad manners. It just slipped out.”

Her comment made him feel no better. He should have lied. But then, what if Miss Wainwright decided to tell Gabriella of their night together just to spite him? Oh, he knew Miss Wainwright was free with her body in the hope of snaring a husband—some man who would be so besotted with her that he would offer her marriage despite her dreadful reputation.

“Gabriella, I have no real excuses. I wanted a woman that night and she made herself available to me. I promise I will be faithful to our marriage vows. I have no idea how well we shall suit when the time comes but we are both sensible people. I believe we can rub along fine together. I am attracted to you and the kiss we shared outside your bedchamber suggests you are attracted to me. I can’t rewrite the past or change the mistakes I have made. Hell, Miss Wainwright is far from the worst mistake I have made.” Gabriella’s eyebrow rose at his bad language and he felt the blush creep up his cheeks. “My apologies.”

“No, please. Nicholas, listen to me. I care not about Miss Wainwright. Perhaps there may always be a sliver of jealousy that I hold for any woman who was in your bed before I was, but I suspect that is normal. I just believe you could do better than me but the announcement has been made and it seems you are stuck with me.”

“I cannot think of anyone I would prefer to be stuck with.” He dropped to his knees and moved over the rug towards her. He raised a hand and cupped her cheek and she leaned into his touch. His hand was on her birthmark, and for the first time she did not seem

embarrassed by it. He leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers.

She opened slightly for him and he moved his lips, coaxing her to follow his lead. She did. One of her gloved hands slid onto his shoulder then around his neck and curled into his hair. He moved his hand around to guide her head, heedless to the sound of one of her hairpins dropping to the floor. She opened her mouth and just as he moved his tongue to plunge it into her mouth, a delicate cough from the door of the drawing room brought him to his senses. Thank heavens he was only partially aroused.

He withdrew his hand slowly, trying to catch a glimpse of Gabriella's face. Her cheeks burned red and her own grasp on his hair loosened. She pulled her hand down to her lap before looking up at him, biting her lip in a most seductive way.

"Goodnight, Nick," she said quietly.

"Goodnight, Gabby," he replied, standing to face his mother, his hands clasped in front of his groin just in case she could see any final remnants of his arousal.

Her eyes glinted and she obviously was struggling not to laugh. "Brook Street awaits you, son," the countess said as he dropped a kiss to her cheek.

"Not for long," he replied, throwing one last look over his shoulder at the woman he couldn't wait to marry. He trotted down the steps of the townhouse a whistle on his lips. Gabriella was a wonderful woman, so clever and quick. Not every woman would have understood what was happening at the theatre, but she had. She'd proved herself faithful and able to control herself in every situation. She's sneaked further into his heart this evening. Damn her. He may very well be falling for her.

Chapter 8

Gabriella placed her gloved fingers on her lips and sighed. Why had she asked such a stupid question? She knew it was not well done of her to ask her betrothed about former lovers, and Nick was too honest for his own good.

Of course, that was exactly the reason she had not told him in the theatre that she had realised immediately her brother had set him up. He would have given the game away and she could not help feeling the more Joseph thought her match was a poor one, the less trouble he would cause. She knew he could not afford to lose the wager so he would do all in his power to prevent the match. He also knew she was strong-willed and would rather remain a spinster than marry someone who would be unfaithful.

"I think it is time for bed, my dear," said the countess from the doorway, interrupting her thoughts.

"Yes, of course." Did Nick's mother think her a light-skirt that she had been willing to kiss her son, at night, in the drawing room? The older woman smiled at her and placed an arm around her shoulder as she led her to the stairs.

"I think we should have a talk in the morning," said Lady Chetfern. Gabriella shot a worried gaze at her and the countess chuckled.

"Oh my dear, I am not angry, nor do I think any less of you for kissing Nick. I stole a few kisses from his father before we wed. I think I need to have the mother-daughter talk with you. No offence to Lady Thornwich but I assume she has not discussed the wedding night with you."

Heat rose in Gabriella's cheeks but she forced herself to look at the older woman as she shook her head.

"No, and although I have the general idea, it would be nice to have a few things... clarified."

"I thought so. I am not easily shocked, Gabriella, so tomorrow feel free to ask me anything you wish. I would have appreciated some

candid advice before I married the earl. Now, sleep well and I shall see you at breakfast. I think another trip to the shops will be in order, followed by an ice at Gunther's."

Gabriella smiled. It didn't matter how old she got, a trip to Gunther's for an ice was always the highlight of a visit to the town, and considering how hot she was after Nick had kissed her, something cool and refreshing would not go amiss.



A loud rattle on the front door made Gabriella jump. Who knew sound could travel so far in a big townhouse like that owned by the Chetferns? But then her bedchamber was directly above the front door. Molly, her maid, had just finished brushing out her hair and was in the process of braiding it before she slipped under the welcome covers of her bed. She was tired from this evening's events.

"What the devil is going on?" came the grumbling tones of the earl.

"Lord Eastden." It was the butler's voice. "What happened?"

Gabriella did not wait to hear any more. She shoved her arms into her dressing gown and was heading out the door of her bedchamber before she had even finished tying it. The butler's voice had been full of concern.

"I found him, just around the corner." She leaned over the bannister and saw a well-dressed gentleman in a greatcoat and top hat, his arm around Nick's waist, helping him down the hall. She followed the earl downstairs. In the pale candlelight she could see the top of Nick's head shining with liquid. Despite his dark hair masking what the liquid was, Gabriella knew it was blood.

But she had no time to be squeamish. The earl had reached Nick.

"I think he was attacked. Footpads most likely," said the young man helping Nick. "I was walking home from White's... that's how I know him, and he was slumped against a railing. I nearly walked by, thinking he was a drunk servant till I spotted his cane. I knew it was a fine cane, not something a ruffian or a servant would own. I bent down and I saw it was Eastden. I just brought him here hoping someone would be home."

"Good idea. You're the younger son of Swain, are you not?"

"Aye, sir."

"Thank you for bringing him home. I shall help him up to his

room. Please excuse my manners, I would offer you a drink but..."

"No! Please, my lord, I need no thanks. I was just glad I was passing." The young man made a quick bow and turned to leave.

The butler and the earl took an arm each and began to help Nick up the stairs. He was muttering incoherently. At least a good thing that he was somewhat conscious. Gabriella hurried up the stairs ahead of the men, encouraging a distraught Lady Chetfern up with her so she would not hamper the men's progress.

"Which room?" Gabriella asked. Lady Chetfern pointed to one across the hall from Gabriella's. She hurried in and was glad to see that Molly had beaten her to it and had already pulled down the sheets and counterpane. The men laid Nick down on the bed and backed away to look at the damage.

Apart from the blood running down his cheek from the head wound and a red mark on his jaw which would likely be a bruise within a few hours, she could see no real signs of damage. Though that was not to say he had not been hurt. She pulled back his greatcoat and coat, relieved to see no signs of a stab wound.

"Nick, where does it hurt?"

"Head and knee," he groaned.

"Which knee?" She placed a hand on his left knee and he howled in pain.

"I'll take that as an answer," she said as much to herself as to anyone else. She raised herself onto tiptoes to look down at his head wound. The blood was congealed, which meant the wound had likely stopped bleeding and was therefore not particularly bad, especially since head wounds tended to bleed like the very devil.

She turned to the earl and the butler. "I think his head wound is small. I suspect it only needs cleaned up. I need to inspect his knee but for the sake of propriety I should get dressed. I can take care of him, but you need to check his body for any other injuries. Check his back, his chest and stomach and his thighs. Remove his clothes down to just his breeches and shirt. His stockings need to go too. Molly, bring up water and cloths. Lady Chetfern, I know it is not the done thing but can you help me into my gown while Molly goes down for the water?"

"Yes, of course dear," said the countess, shaking her head as if coming out of a trance. Tears streaked her cheeks and her hands shook. Gabriella guided her out of the room and across the hall. Within minutes, Gabriella was looking respectable in a yellow day dress. She had managed it largely without the help of Lady Chetfern who had sat on the bed, wringing her hands and gazing worriedly at the door despite Gabriella's assurances that Nick would be fine.

Her stays were far from tight enough, but she did not have time to wait for her maid. She grabbed a fishu from a drawer, tucked it into

her not so well-covered décolletage and walked out the door.

She arrived back in the room and her heart almost stopped. Nick was propped up in bed, his shirt open, showing part of his chest with a smattering of springy black hair. His legs were bare to the knee too and her belly seemed to go warm suddenly. What was happening to her?

"He has a few nasty red marks on his torso which I imagine will turn into bruises but nothing seems broken. His knee is pretty swollen and I suspect you are right about the head wound," declared the earl. "Do you think this is proper for you to tend him?"

Gabriella shrugged. "If it is inappropriate, feel free to force us to marry on Christmas Eve." The earl barked out a laugh. "I have helped our housekeeper tend the wounds of many men who work the estate. I married none of them. Stay if you feel it appropriate, but I have Molly. Besides, he looks in no state to ravish me. Would you not agree? He is pretty battered but he shall be fine. I have no doubt about it."

The earl smiled at this. "I shall go and force my countess to drink some brandy for her nerves. I'll send up some laudanum for my son."

"No laudanum," came a loud grunt from the bed. Both Gabriella and the earl turned to Nick. His eyes seemed to blaze with fire for a moment. "Please. No laudanum." Gabriella swallowed hard and nodded.

"Fine. We will not give you laudanum unless you ask for it."

"Good."

"It's odd," said the earl gazing at his son, his mouth twisting. The older man then pointed at a money purse sitting on the bedside table. "The footpads never robbed him."

"Not footpads," declared Nick scowling. "They were gentlemen."

"Joseph?" asked Gabriella, her heart pounding.

"I didn't see. The cowards hit me from behind."

"How do you know they were gentlemen?"

Nick rubbed his side.

"Believe me, I know a well-made pair of hessians when they are kicking me in the ribs."

"Oh!"

"Plus, they had refined accents. They were no street urchins."

"I see. Well, let us put you to rights, my lord. Perhaps we can worry about who did this once you are not staining the pillows with the blood on your head."

Nick grimaced.

"I believe you are correct, Gabriella, and you are properly chaperoned if your maid is here. Carry on." The earl guided his wife out of the bedchamber and presumably to the nearest brandy decanter.



“Gah!” Nick roared as Gabriella lifted his knee gently,

holding it until her maid placed a pillow under it and then let it down slowly. The pain was so intense it made him want to cast up his accounts there and then, but he would not show himself up in front of her.

“I am sorry,” she whispered, “but it does need to be elevated.” She placed cold, wet cloths over the knee he was sure was twice the size it was supposed to be.

“Shall I take the dirty water down to the kitchen, my lady?” asked the maid, scowling into the large bowl of water he assumed to be somewhat bloody given the state of his head.

“Yes please, Molly. I shall use the bowl on the side there but please bring up some more cold water.”

“Yes, my lady.” Molly bobbed a curtsy as Gabriella placed a hand on either side of his face and pushed his face into her bosom so she could inspect the wound at the crown of his head. His body reacted instantly. The poor girl was clearly not thinking about the situation she was currently in as she ran a damp cloth over the head wound.

He sucked in a breath at a sharp sting and placed his hands on her waist. It wasn’t that the head wound itself was sore, but he was already nauseated from the pain in his knee.

Damn, she had luscious breasts. Every part of his being, and one part in particular, wanted him to stick out his tongue and lick the skin just under his lips. Thank heavens for the fishu. It seemed to taunt him and remind him of his need to be honourable at this moment. Meanwhile the throbbing in his knee reminded him he could hardly tumble the girl even if he wanted to. And the new ache in his groin told him he desperately wanted to.

“It has nearly stopped bleeding,” she remarked as another sting made him suck in a breath, filled with her scent of lavender. Involuntarily his hands moved higher. His manhood was straining at the fall of his breeches and she still had no idea what kind of predicament she was in.

He brushed the knuckles of his thumbs along the underside of her breast and she gasped. Whether it was a gasp of pleasure or one of outrage, he was not sure. He moved his thumbs again.

“My lord,” her voice was husky.

More desire than protest then.

He smiled against her décolletage and pursed his lips, dropping a kiss to the one bit of spare skin her fischu did not cover. She stepped away, biting her lip. "My lord, that is wholly inappropriate," she said, the censure in her voice somewhat lacking.

"Did you like it though, Gabby?" he asked.

Her throat worked as she swallowed and looked anywhere but at him. "My lord, we are not yet married."

"No, we are not. But I asked if you liked it. Did you?"

Her cheeks were crimson, almost hiding the strawberry birthmark. She nodded slowly.

"Me too." He grinned.

"My lord!" she chastised.

"Oh don't 'my lord' me, Gabby. You were the one who stuck my face in your bosom. I just... took advantage of it."

"I did and I am sorry."

"I am not sorry. It took my mind off the pain in this blasted knee."

"Well, I am afraid my bosom will no longer be acting as a distraction for you, Nicholas."

"Oh my darling Gabby, even from here it is a delightful distraction."



Gabriella knew she should go to bed. He could easily ring for a servant if he needed anything. He may be in pain but he was in no danger. But somehow she could not bring herself to leave his side. Molly snorted as she made herself more comfortable on the leather seat next to the hearth and her gentle snoring continued.

She looked around the masculine bedchamber, decorated in a dark blue and gold. Her gaze fell on the small desk, clear of everything but a pot of ink and a quill in its holder before gazing at the landscape above the fireplace. It looked like Chetfern estate but the building was ancient. She presumed it was the old abbey. Her attention then turned to rows upon rows of tin soldiers sitting on a table top, placed as if they were about to wage war on each other. How long had they been here? How long had he kept them? She could see some of them were very old-fashioned in their garments. A few reminded her of pictures she had seen from the time of Henry VIII or Queen Elizabeth.

"I collect them. Some are very old." The croaky voice from the bed made her jump and she placed her hand on her chest, feeling her

heart pounding.

"Do you still play with them?" she retaliated a moment later.

"No, though I will pass them to my son when we have one." His last words were a low promise. *When we have one.* Of course she knew her purpose was to bear him children, but she really had not thought much further than the wedding and perhaps their first night as man and wife. She turned to look at him and he grinned. "I hate to be a bother but is there anything to drink?"

"I have lemonade, water or brandy. Your father brought in the brandy after he had calmed your mother down."

"Did she have a fit of the vapours?" he asked.

"No. She was just upset. No one likes to see their baby hurt."

"I am hardly a baby."

"I believe you will always be your mother's baby. She was shaken and upset. She could not even tie the..." She stopped and turned away from him. What was she doing? She had nearly mentioned her stays to Lord Eastden.

"She couldn't even what, Gabby? What could she not tie?"

"Nothing. She is fine now."

"Are you sure?" He tried to pull himself up on the bed but grimaced.

"Yes, I am. Nick. Lie down or you will hurt yourself."

"I feel like I have been run over by a coach and six."

"More like a bunch of bullies led by my brother."

"Now, Gabby, we do not know it was Thornwich."

"Perhaps not but... Nick, what are you doing?"

Nick had pulled his shirt free from his breeches and was baring his stomach to her, inspecting the purpling bruises on his belly and around his rib cage. He touched two fingers to the one just under his sternum and grimaced.

"Don't scold me, Gabby. I have a right to see what state they have left me in and you shall see me fully naked soon enough."

"Yes, but..."

"Ow!" he was inspecting another bruise on his side. Now was not the time to be prissy.

"Here, I have some salve. It should help." She leaned over and picked up the small jar. Taking a fingerful of the gooey substance, Gabriella touched some to the bruise on his far side. He sucked in his breath through his teeth and she murmured an apology, but she worked the salve into his skin, noticing his muscles relax as the pain eased.

"Oh, that is nice," he murmured. "What is in it?"

"Chilli peppers from South America."

"Chilli peppers?"

“Yes. They reduce the amount of pain. I think it’s because they heat up the skin. An apothecary gave some to my mother when I broke my arm when I was ten. She always kept a jar of it handy and I do too. I hardly ever use it except on the workmen on the estate.” She took another dollop of salve and worked on the bruise just to the right of his navel. He winced again, but this time his muscles relaxed more quickly.

“You minister to the workmen on your brother’s estate in this manner?” She looked up into his scowling gaze.

“I have never ministered to a man who has been kicked repeatedly on the torso before. Usually it is leg, arm or face and head injuries. Yours is the first male torso I have ever touched.”

“Mmm!” He threw his head back against the pillow. “I wish you had not said that. I cannot believe I still have to wait nine days until I can haul you astride me and watch you ride yourself to oblivion.” A smile tipped the corners of his mouth and although she had no idea what he meant about riding him to oblivion, she knew he was talking about the marital bed. She could not ask the countess about it tomorrow. It sounded very personal and she was absolutely convinced that Nick would be patient and kind to her and not expect much of her in the beginning.

He opened his eyes and gazed at her, his brow crinkling. “Oh God, what did I just say? I said that out loud, did I not?”

She nodded.

He groaned, dropping his head back on the pillow and covering his eyes with his hand. “I’m sorry, Gabby. The pain in my knee is excruciating and I’m trying my hardest to keep my mind off it. I spoke without thinking and I have offended you. Please accept my humblest apology.”

“There is no need. I am not offended. A little surprised and confused as to what you mean but not offended.”

He raised a hand, stroking the back of his knuckles down her cheek—that cheek. The one she had hated since she was old enough to understand the large red mark was not normal—that it set her apart from other little girls. She shuddered, unable to stop the reaction to his gentle caress. She was terribly attracted to this man and her body craved something that she did not understand, but she would not dare to believe he found her attractive despite the lovely words he spoke.

She turned back to the jar of salve, intent on finishing her task and disappearing back to her own bedchamber before she acted on the desire to press her lips to that bruise forming below his sternum. What would the skin on his torso feel like against her lips? For that matter, did people even kiss parts of the body that were not the lips and hands? She licked her own lips. Nine more days and she would know.



He was in agony, and not just in his knee, head and torso. The expressions fleeting across her face made him grow harder, and then her pink tongue peeked out from her mouth and moistened her lips. He was almost undone.

Her mouth changed into a hard line as she set about completing her task of rubbing salve into his bruises. He had to admit that the chilli pepper concoction was helping, as was the view down her cleavage when she leaned down to rub the medicinal concoction around his hip which, until that moment, he had not realised was sore. Her hand worked, skimming the waistline of his breeches. He bit back a moan of pleasure as she unknowingly let her hand stray rather too near the part of his body that was most impressed by her touch.

He placed his hand over his straining erection. Better that she nudge his arm than anything else, both for his sake and hers.

“Are you nearly finished?” he rasped, praying to God in heaven that this beautiful torment would be over soon.

“Yes.” She placed the lid on the jar, wiped her hands on a linen, before leaning over him to check his wound. Devil take it. She was temptation incarnate and those breasts were dangerously close to his face again. As for her earlier comment about his mother and tying something... it had been the laces of her stays that had not been tied properly because those breasts were almost in their natural state and they were glorious.

He closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

“I’m going to bed now. Is there anything more you need before I retire? The bell cord is here by your side.”

A kiss goodnight.

Instead he lifted her hand and pressed it to his lips. She smiled shyly at him then pulled her hand away and moved to wake her maid.

Nine more days and she would be his. He doubted he had anticipated bedding a woman like this since he had been a virgin.

Chapter 9

It had been a very long week. Nick had been frustrated by his knee, by the bruises around his ribcage, by the beautiful creature who had tended him in the first couple of days after his beating and by the slow passage of time until their wedding. He had hobbled into the Archbishop of Canterbury's office and attained the special licence so he and Lady Gabriella could marry on Christmas Eve. Now the organisation of the big day was out of the way, he was champing at the bit to have it out of the way so he and Gabriella could be together —properly.

He had agreed to spend Christmas at Chetfern, despite his desire to take his new bride back to the Eastden Estate, twenty miles east of his family seat. His mother had conceded and allowed him to open up the dower house for their wedding night and for Christmas night so they could have proper privacy. When he made Gabriella scream in pleasure, he had no desire to be worrying whether his parents could hear her.

He straightened his leg in front of the fire, pleased to note that instead of searing pain, there was just a dull ache at the movement. He glanced morosely at the book in his hands. It was a good enough book but he was bored.

Where the devil was Gabriella?

As if by magic, she appeared in the doorway of the drawing room, her eyes bright with excitement, her breathing laboured as if she had been hurrying.

"Nick, does your knee still hurt terribly?" she asked, curling her fingers into her skirts, lifting them slightly and giving him a lovely view of her ankles. He raised his reluctant gaze to her face.

"Not terribly. It still pains me a little and I am reliant on that damned cane." She blanched at his curse. "I apologise. I wish to be outside instead of stuck in this armchair."

"The servants are going into the woods to find evergreens to

decorate the house. I wondered..." She stopped and bit her lip. "Are you able to come and help?"

A walk! It was just the thing. And he knew exactly which part of the woods to take her.

"I would love to," he said, pulling himself to his feet and grabbing his cane. Pain shot through his knee but he willed it away. It would ease as he walked. He stopped at the sideboard, poured himself small measure of brandy and threw it back. He was all for being manly, but a little alcohol to numb the pain never went amiss.

"Are you sure?" she asked, placing a hand on his arm, a frown marring her brow.

"I should love to accompany you and the walk shall do my knee good."

"I shall go and put on my pelisse, gloves and bonnet and meet you at the front door in a few minutes." She turned and hurried up the stairs, her hips swaying the pink muslin of her day dress. He caught a glimpse of her ankles as she climbed the stairs. His blood heated.

Two days.



Nick stumbled slightly and Gabriella stuck out a hand to steady

him. She was not entirely sure this had been a sensible idea. He was clearly still in some pain but he was a man and therefore he was stubborn.

"We can go back," she hissed, looking around her to check there were no servants to hear her concession to his painful knee. She knew he would rather die than appear weak. Why were men like that? It defied explanation.

"No. I stumbled over a blasted tree root. I am fine. Only a short way until we find the mistletoe. I know where it is."

"Mistletoe." It was not as cold today as it had been and heat flamed her cheeks. "Is it proper to have mistletoe in the house?"

"We have always had mistletoe in the house at Christmas. I just never had anyone to kiss under it before... not properly." His voice was low and husky and contained a wicked promise that seemed to cause a tension just below her belly. Over the past week, he had stolen the odd chaste kiss from her, but she could tell from the way his gaze lingered on her body that he wished for more. She may be innocent, but she was not stupid.

"I see. We never had it. Well, I don't think so. Certainly since mother and father died we have not really celebrated Christmas."

"Not at all?"

"Oh well, Joseph usually gives me a book on animal husbandry or estate finance or crop rotation as a gift and we do have goose for dinner that day. But we never decorate the manor."

"Why does he give you such books?"

"Because I run the estate, for the most part."

"Ah yes, you said as much the morning you were dealing with the thatcher."

"Yes. If I did not take charge, I doubt anything would be done. Joseph refuses to pay a man of business or a land steward."

"And what will happen when we marry?"

She shrugged.

"I must confess it is the one biggest fear and regret I have about marrying you. I like you very much and I believe you are right that we will deal well together. However, I worry about my friends at Thornwich and what will become of them. I would have suggested we ride over there sometime this week but I was worried about your bruising. I don't imagine riding a horse would be particularly comfortable for you right now."

It was true. She was worried about the housekeeper and the butler and the tenants and the stable hands and everyone else associated with the estate. She suspected Joseph had no money whatsoever.

"No, it would not. Though I suspect in a few days it will be fine."

"Good. Perhaps we could..." She looked up at him, her eyes wide. He would have... expectations of her during the few days after their wedding. "Oh I apologise, my lord. Of course we shall be married, we cannot just..."

He chuckled.

"Gabriella, while the thought of keeping you nestled in my arms and in my bed for the foreseeable future is tempting, there are only so many times in a day a couple can make love. We shall be able to join my parents for Christmas dinner and possibly even cards afterwards. We may even make it to Christmas morning service if you desperately want to go. And we can visit your brother too."

"Oh!" In truth, she had not really considered what life was like for a newly married lady on the days just after her wedding.

He stopped suddenly. "Ah, here we are." He pointed to a branch just a bit higher than his head on which the parasitic plant had attached itself. "There is always a lot of mistletoe around here." He reached up and pulled on the branch, broke off a few sprigs and handed them to her. She accepted them. "Gabriella, do you understand what will happen on the night of our wedding? Someone

has explained, have they not?"

"Your mother explained. She asked if I had any questions."

He turned from his task and raised an eyebrow. "And did you?"

She looked at him, shame burning inside her. Of course she had questions, lots of them. How big was his 'rod'—the word used by his mother to describe his anatomy? How could he hold himself up and move in her the way it had been described? The more she thought on the act the more confused she got. Would they be naked or would she still have her nightrail on?

She nodded mutely.

"Gabriella, I don't want you coming to our marriage bed afraid and confused. I would rather we were both embarrassed now and we talk frankly. It may not be proper, but I care more for your ease than I do for propriety."

She looked into his hazel eyes and smiled. He really was the best of men and did have her interests at heart.

"I may be a little confused, Nick, but I am not afraid. I trust you and I have faith that our first night together will be everything either of us would want it to be."

He let the branch of the old oak spring back into place then turned, one sprig in his hand which he raised aloft. As he advanced on her, she backed up against the tree trunk, slightly in awe of the wolfish gleam in his eye.

She swallowed hard. He did not have the intention of just a chaste peck. Of that she had no doubt. Her heart beat faster. Inside her kidskin gloves her palms moistened.

He moved closer still, dropping his cane and catching her around the waist.

"Do you trust me enough to let me kiss you thoroughly, Lady Gabriella?"

"I do, Lord Eastden."

He threw his hat to the ground then loosened the ribbons of her bonnet, tossing that atop the blanket of fallen leaves too. Then he pressed a kiss to her jawline, and she leaned her head back onto the bark of the tree. He kissed down the column of her neck and she sighed, easing her hips against him in a most wanton fashion. His lips met the fur collar of her pelisse. He moved them back up to her chin, then he captured her lips.

That was the moment Gabriella surrendered.



Emotion welled in him as he became aware of her surrender. No

one had ever trusted him in this way before. Here they were alone in the woods and he could easily ravish her.

Of course he knew he would never do that. It would be unconscionable. Ravishing an innocent in the woods in December two days before her wedding? It didn't bear thinking about—even if he was her bridegroom. But she did not know that.

Or did she?

As he plunged his tongue into her mouth, she tweaked the buttons of his greatcoat and wrapped her arms around him inside the warmth of the woollen fabric. For all the layers of clothing between them, he felt closer to her as he explored her mouth, her tongue and her lips. She explored his mouth too. One of his hands tangled in her coif as the other moved lower to cup her pert bottom.

With each stroke of his tongue, her hips moved and when she moaned into his mouth, he cared naught that she was an innocent. She was a passionate woman and she was going to make an excellent bed partner. And she seemed to have a curiosity about her own pleasure which he had never found among the innocents he had kissed in the past. She arched, rocked against him, explored him. Did she explore herself in the darkness of her bedchamber? Now there was a thought that made his hard length throb with excitement.

Her hand was on his arse, kneading, drawing him closer still. Christ, there was every possibility this woman would kill him with her ardour. But he would die a happy man.

He pulled up her skirts, just enough to ease her movements as he pressed his good knee between her thighs. She moaned again and he lifted her fully onto his thigh, very much aware that her hip was stroking his hard length through his breeches. It was heavenly.

He continued to kiss her as their surroundings disappeared from his awareness. For now there was just her and him. Two lovers finding pleasure in each other.

There was every chance he was going to disgrace himself, but somehow, he didn't care. The woman he cared for was finding her own pleasure and he intended to help her. He deepened the kiss, stroking her tongue and the inside of her cheek as he fiddled with the buttons of her fur-lined pelisse. All the while she rubbed her hot, needy flesh up and down his buckskin-clad thigh, looking forward to the day when his fingers would dance though that flesh—when he could touch it for real. But not now.

When he gained access, he cupped her breast. Three more layers of

clothing lay between him and these treasures but he would not bare flesh. Not today. He would not have her half-dressed out in the cold. But he did find her pebbled nipple through her clothing and brushed his thumb firmly over it.

Her groan was one of pleasure mixed with confusion and she ripped her mouth from his, resting her forehead in the crook of his neck, her hips still beating out their rhythm against his thigh and against his self-control.

"Nick, what's happening?" she gasped before an almost pained moan escaped her lips. He tightened his grip on her backside, urging her on, nearly delirious with the pleasure she was giving to him. He was so close.

"You're nearly at oblivion, my love. It's completely natural and beautiful. Keep going."

"I... I don't want to stop. But it seems..." she ground out.

"Don't stop," he urged, pressing a kiss to the side of her head. He couldn't bear it if she stopped now through panic at the strange sensations.

Her hip movements had become more intent and he pressed his thigh harder against her. His injured knee was now screaming with pain but he would not let her stop. If he could give her this—the knowledge of her own body's needs before their wedding night, then the pain of the consummation for her would hopefully be fleeting.

He felt his own body tighten as she changed her stroke, determined, needy and desperate.

He gritted his teeth as he spilled into his breeches, trying to mask his grunt of satisfaction. This was about Gabriella, not him and his pleasure. But it was a welcome release nonetheless and probably the only accident of this sort in his life that held no shame... only joy and desire.

And then it happened.

A high keening sound, the tightening of her muscles, the painful gripping of her thighs around his and then a slow shuddering as she gasped for breath. He moved his hands up, one on her shoulders to steady her and one on the small of her back, soothing in small circles as her climax peaked then faded.

They stood for long moments as they caught their breaths. He had a sticky mess inside his breeches and he could not have been happier about it. She gasped against his waistcoat, her face buried under two layers of wool.

Gabriella drew in a deep breath and lifted her head, her brown eyes meeting his gaze.

"Do you think me very wanton?" she asked, confusion, pleasure and concern warring in their chocolate depths. Something sparkled on

her cheek. Oh God, it must be a tear. She was crying and he was the scoundrel who had caused it.

"No, my love. I encouraged it. I wanted to see you come apart in my arms. I wanted you to know at least some of the pleasure that can happen in the marriage bed without you having your innocence taken before your wedding day. Please don't cry."

She blinked then scowled. Her gaze moved to his shoulders and up to the sky.

"It's snowing!" she cried out, her voice full of wonder and childish glee—a marked contrast to the siren who had come apart in his arms a few moments before.

He grinned at her. "That is all you have to say?"

She turned her attention back to him and returned his grin. "If you do not think me a wanton, what else is there to say? Except thank you, of course."

"You are most welcome."

"Will that happen every time we are intimate?" She bit her lip shyly. He wanted to laugh. Her skirts were hitched up to her knee, her most intimate part was still pressed against his muscular thigh and she was still flushed from what he presumed was her first ever orgasm. But she had become shy all of a sudden.

"If I am a good husband, you should."

She climbed off his thigh, adjusted her skirts and rebuttoned her pelisse. "Then I shall expect it."

He bit his own lip to stop the bark of laughter. He loved this damned chit.

Loved?

As he picked up his walking cane, she gathered the discarded mistletoe before they re-donned their headwear and linked arms. Their embrace had left his knee stiff and sore and he hobbled slightly.

"Have you hurt your knee?"

"It's fine."

"I heard you grunt in pain just before I..." She made a motion with her hand showing she was not sure how to express what had happened to her.

"It wasn't pain." Why he was telling her, he did not know but she deserved the truth. "It was pleasure. Just before you..." he mimicked her motion "...I did too."

"Oh!" Despite the delightful colour in her cheeks, he was even more delighted by the triumphant smile that tugged her lips. Gabriella was at last seeing just how much she could entice a man. Perhaps he was beginning to undo some of the damage his cruel words had inflicted all those years ago.

Chapter 10

Nick walked into the breakfast room the next morning, a wide grin on his face. Tomorrow would be his wedding day and he could honestly not see what the fuss was about. The idea of spending the rest of his life with Gabriella did not feel at all like a leg shackle. He could not wait to get her luscious curves into his bed.

His breath hitched as he stopped just inside the doorway to the room, the crackling fire making the place far too hot and a vision of loveliness standing staring morosely out the window. He approached her. Glancing around to check that no servants were hovering and pleased to see the room empty, he caught the tops of her arms and placed a gentle kiss just where her neck and shoulder joined.

“Nick,” she remonstrated just as she moved her head to give him the access he needed to nuzzle up her neck and drop a kiss behind her ear.

“I know, but what are they going to do? Make us marry?” She smiled at his use of her argument.

“For someone about to marry a handsome fellow like me, you look rather despondent,” he teased. She heaved a sigh and pointed out the window.

“The snow came to naught really.” He looked at the light dusting of snow, not even enough to fully cover the lawn and the paths were their usual brown muddy state.

“Ah, but look at the leaden sky, my love. I have every faith that you will be tramping through the snow to say your vows. I’m so glad you agreed to have the wedding here in the chapel after all. A few friends are arriving from London today and your brother and sister-in-law have been invited. I just hope everyone arrives before the snow gets too bad.”

As if on cue a few large snowflakes fluttered to the ground and she shivered against him. He pulled her shawl up over her shoulders and stepped away. She turned, expectant. He melted. Dropping his head,

he placed a soft, lingering but chaste kiss on her lips.

"Stop tempting me, you beautiful, wonderful woman." Her lips curved into a smile and she moved her hand as if she was about to cover her birthmark but then lowered it.

"We should get breakfast before it gets cold," she said simply. He nodded and followed her to where the food lay, lifting a plate to help serve her before serving himself.



"My lord, The Earl of Thornwich is here to see you. He is in

the study. I suggested he come in here but he said he wanted to speak to you in your father's study."

"Really? Fine."

Gabriella looked from the stern butler to her betrothed and saw a look of puzzlement pass between the men.

"Gabriella, would you like to come?"

"Umm..." she looked at the butler who shrugged almost imperceptibly. "Very well." She rose and followed Nick.

When they entered the earl's study she was surprised to find Joseph sitting behind the earl's desk, his feet up on the furniture. Nick barely seemed to notice.

"Ah, Eastden, you are not the brightest of fellows it seems. I have barely been here two minutes and already I have in my hand on the special licence you procured so you can marry my sister. That was very silly of you. Now all I need to do is drop it in the fire and you lose the wager."

Nick moved to sit on one of the high-backed chairs at one side on the hearth and motioned to the other for Gabriella. She took a seat, horror building inside her. Her brother was going to ruin her wedding and cause Nick to lose the wager. She looked from the handsome viscount, who lifted one booted leg onto the knee of his other leg, wincing slightly. She tried not to smile. In his attempt at nonchalance he had forgotten the bruising on his knee.

"Is that why you are here, Thornwich? To try and stop the wedding and win the wager?"

"I came to talk sense into you, man. Look at her. Spinster material if ever I saw it. You shall both be miserable."

"Like you are? Tell me, Thornwich, how much do you pay Miss Wainwright to warm your bed whenever you are in town?"

Gabriella gasped. Of course she knew Miss Wainwright was Joseph's mistress but no one spoke about such things in polite company.

"That is none of your business, Eastden."

"And my impending marriage is none of yours."

"You really want to marry a wench with the mark of the devil on her?" Gabriella's hand flew to her cheek. On many occasions as she had grown up her brother had thrown that cruel taunt in her direction, but no one else had ever heard it. He would sit at the dinner table rubbing his cheek, making little horns with his fingers when their parents were not looking. When she was younger she would rise to the bait and be scolded for making a fuss about nothing. When she got older, she ignored the insults.

"If you mean an insignificant birthmark, then yes. But let me tell you, Thornwich--from this moment on, every nasty jibe you make at your sister's expense will lose you five thousand pounds of the settlement I am about to offer you for your sister's hand."

"Settlement? What the devil are you on about?" Joseph was on his feet, the special licence still in his hand.

"It's simple. I am rich and you... well, you have gambled away your inheritance and no doubt your sister's dowry too." Gabriella looked up and saw the truth of Nick's statement in her brother's eyes. No wonder she had been unable to find a husband on the marriage mart. Some cash poor aristocrats would marry Prinny himself for his money, if such a thing were legal. They would have overlooked her marked skin if her dowry had been intact.

"Gabs, I..."

Gabriella held up a staying hand. She did not want to hear his excuses. Instead she focused on the ruby of Nick's cravat pin and willed herself not to cry.

"Here is the deal. The wager is off, but for the sake of gentlemanly honour I shall marry Gabriella tomorrow and officially win the bet as far as every gentleman in White's and every gossip of the Beau Monde are concerned. I shall not collect my winnings but everyone will assume the debt has been paid."

"I shall give you twenty thousand pounds. Ten thousand to pay off any outstanding debts, wages etcetera and ten thousand to be held in trust for improvements to your estate.

"My man of business and my land steward will arrive on the day after Boxing Day and they will work in your office and on your estate. You will give them every help and they shall turn around the estate, making it profitable again. The ten thousand pounds held in trust is to be used only for estate improvements, buying any animals, tools or whatever is required. Once the estate is in profit again you can keep

on my men and learn from your mistakes or you can send them back to my employ."

"Why are you doing this? I don't see what is in it for you."

"Your sister can rest easy knowing that her brother is not getting further into debt and is not doing anything that is likely to get himself hanged."

Gabriella made a little yelp of protest but Nick ignored her, rising to his feet and fishing in his coat pocket.

"The night you attacked me I saw you and recognised you. As you tripped me up and I twisted my knee, I heard something tinkle onto the pavement. Once you had gone and before I all but lost consciousness, I searched for what had fallen." He held up a cravat pin. "It has the Thornwich crest on it."

Gabriella jumped to her feet.

"Joseph, how could you?" Joseph too was out of his seat and backing up against the window. Gabriella noticed that the small flurry of snow had turned into a veritable blizzard.

Joseph shook his head. "I had no choice. I never planned to kill you. I just wanted to make it too difficult for you to wed her before Christmas."

Nick tossed the cravat pin at Joseph, who fumbled with it and just managed to stop it from falling to the floor.

"I know you didn't want to kill me. You don't have it in you, Thornwich. You're feckless, you're a wastrel and you're dissolute. But you are not a murderer. Take the money, turn your life around and do the right thing for that babe in Edna's belly. You know, my mother is friends with her mother so I used to know her reasonably well. She's not a bad sort. But you treat her badly. Give up the courtesans and the mistresses and give her a chance to be a proper wife."

"What about this?" Joseph held up the pin. "Are you going to get the magistrate involved?"

"I have no evidence." Nick raked his fingers through his hair. "Look, tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Come to the wedding with Edna, walk your sister down the aisle and give her away into what I can only hope will be a happy marriage. Let us all start again. The money and the help are yours. We shall be brothers by marriage. It is the least I can do."

"I don't deserve it," said Joseph quietly.

"Perhaps not, but then I don't deserve to be marrying someone as special and kind-hearted as your sister. I'm lucky. I didn't lose my parents at sixteen. You may have turned out differently but for that carriage accident. I've done enough things in my life that I'm not proud of."

"I don't know, Eastden. It's a very generous offer."

“Don’t be a damned fool, Thornwich. We all know farming is hard these days. If your land becomes worthless, Chetfern land loses value too.” He turned to Gabriella and scowled. “Stop looking at me like that. This is business, nothing more. And Thornwich, put that damned marriage licence back in the drawer where you found it.” With that Nick stomped out of the room, leaving brother and sister alone in the study together.

Joseph turned shining eyes on Gabriella and she choked back tears.

“I’m so sorry, Gabs.”

She nodded as a big tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek. “I know,” she managed.

“Do you want me to walk you down the aisle? I would understand if you sent me to the devil.”

“You are the only thing I have left of father and mother. All I ever wanted was for you to care, Joseph.”

He moved slowly then wrapped her in a hug, his large frame enveloping her, his tears dripping onto her hair.



Nick paced across the drawing room again. What was taking them so long? Was that brother of hers trying to talk her out of marrying him? He should not have left her alone with him but, at the same point, she needed to mend the relationship she had with her brother in her own way. And besides, he could not take that look she was giving him as if he was some kind of Christmas angel.

Had it not been for Nick, Gabriella’s life may have been very different. His own mother would probably have sponsored her come out. Thornwich would probably not have been such a prize ass and possibly neither would he have been. His own father would have taught Gabby’s brother to manage his estate and how to enjoy life but enjoy it responsibly just as he did.

He heard the front door slam and hurried to the window to see Thornwich swing himself easily up onto his horse, the snow already settling on top of his hat.

The fast padding of her slippers over the parquet flooring alerted him to her presence, then her arms were around his waist as she too watched her brother ride down the private road.

“I hope he shall be all right in all this snow.”

“He’s safer on horseback than in a carriage,” Nick said. “Is

everything all right between you two?"

"Well, we have some way to go but I think we made a start towards some kind of brother-sister relationship. He is returning to Thornwich then he and Edna are coming straight here so that he will not miss the wedding. Will that be all right?"

"Yes. I'll let the servants know. And what about the marriage licence?"

"Back in the drawer as you asked. Nick, he plans to follow your lead and start again. He wants to make a go of Thornwich estate. He says he will pay you back as soon as the estate starts making money."

"There really is no need, but he and I can sort that out sometime in the future."

"Nick?" Her voice had turned coquettish.

"Yes."

"Do married people only...you know...at night?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because when we were out in the woods yesterday, it was daytime."

"And?"

"Well I know we did not do the act but had we been married might we have?"

"Yes, we might have."

"So it can be done during the day."

"Yes."

"Could it be done now?"

"If we were married, yes it could."

She nodded. He frowned. Where was she going with this?

"And if we were married, would you want to? Now?"

Was it reassurance? And if so, reassurance of what? Reassurance that he wanted her or reassurance that he would not be pouncing on her at every opportunity?

He strode over and closed the drawing room doors. If anyone walked in, they would find them talking... or at worst kissing. Nothing more. He was not going to debauch her on the drawing room chaise, much though he wanted to. He moved back and sat down beside her on the chaise.

"Men have needs and ladies have needs too, but men seem to have more frequent needs," he started. "Men can be aroused throughout the day even sometimes when they are not thinking about ladies with whom they want to couple. Sometimes we wake up aroused without dreaming of anything we desire. So yes, at this time of day we may want to couple and we may choose to. You may want to bed me or vice versa at any time of the day or night. Sometimes propriety will mean it cannot happen, sometimes one or other of us will not want to

because we are tired or ill. But know this—you can always refuse and I will not complain and whether I am I bedding you or not I find you beautiful and charming and enticing.”

“Nick, you do not have to say such things. I know the truth.”

He gritted his teeth and smoothed the back of his fingers down the cheek with her birthmark.

“Oh no, Gabby, you do not know the truth. You don’t know that when I am not with you I have conversations in my head with you where I try to make you laugh just so I can see you smile. Your eyes shine and you light up the room when you laugh. You make my heart leap out my chest when I see you. When we are in a room, I want to be near enough to smell the lavender soap that you use or to feel the warmth of your body or the brush of the hem of your skirts against my ankle. But no other woman would do, Gabriella. Only you. And I wish I could take back what I said all those years ago. I’m sorry for hurting you and for the pain I caused our families. I do hope that one day you can forgive me.”

Gabriella smiled.

“I already forgave you, Nick, but you need to forgive yourself. What you did today has more than made up for the strawberry jam remark. It is time to move on.”

Nick felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He gathered her in his arms and sank back against the armrest of the chaise, enjoying the feel of her head against his chest. They remained there for a long time, just listening to the other breathe, happy to be in one another’s company.

Yes, he wanted to drag her up his body and impale her on his hard flesh but he was just as content to lie here and enjoy her silent company.

Besides, there was only twenty-four hours left.

Chapter 11

Nick looked over the drawing room and caught the brown gaze of his wife, who bit her lip shyly and sent a spear of need straight to his groin. She looked stunning in a white satin gown with a silver overdress embroidered with glistening rosebuds. Her hair had been curled up off her face in an elaborate coif and hot house flowers had been laced strategically between the locks. He noticed someone had powdered her cheek to mask the birthmark that still seemed to cause her so much distress. He grimaced internally. She had no need to hide it, but he understood why she did it nonetheless.

She was talking to her sister-in-law and pointing out the window where another heavy fall of snow was currently in progress. Joseph and Edna had arrived the night before along with the rest of their guests, fearing that the inclement weather would prevent them from attending the nuptials. The woman had seemed to have a personality change in the length of time it had taken Thornwich to go home, pack and come back. She had been most pleasant at dinner. Perhaps Thornwich's new leaf extended to his marriage. Nick hoped so because he saw potential in Edna and the women seemed to be getting on well. Also Edna now had her rival for the staff's affections out of her house. That had to be a relief. He understood there was often jealousy when a new mistress arrived.

"Thank you, Eastden, for everything." Nick turned to find his brother by marriage watching Edna and Gabriella chuckling at something Nick's young cousin Jack was doing. The three-year-old was rolling around on the floor and singing. Nick did not want to know what the child was up to.

Nick raised his brandy glass. "To new beginnings."
"Aye, to new beginnings."



Gabriella curtsayed to her partner, an elderly uncle of her new husband, and drew in a deep breath. The impromptu dancing in the large drawing room had delighted her. A number of servants with varying degrees of musicality were coerced into playing, the rugs were rolled back and furniture pushed against the wall.

This set of country dances had been particularly lively and Gabriella was completely out of breath. She walked over to the chaise where Nick sat alone, nursing a brandy. He could not have been there for long because he had been talking to the vicar when this set had begun.

“Oh, Nick, be a dear and fetch me a drink, please.”

“No.”

She turned to him, aghast. Had he just refused to get a lady a drink? And his own wife at that?

“Nick? What...” He leaned close and his breath tickled the hairs falling out of her coif near her ear.

“Time to get that beautiful fur-lined cloak you wore to the church and your boots, my dear. The only person you shall be getting hot and bothered with for the rest of the evening is me.”

“But it is only six o’clock.”

“It is nearly seven o’clock. It will take at least half an hour for us to extract ourselves from all these relatives and we have half a mile in the snow to walk. And then I am going to wish you a very special and very early Merry Christmas.” He ran a finger down her bare arm and she shivered, turning to gaze into his hazel eyes. They burned with desire, and anticipation coiled through her. “Come, my love,” he coaxed gently. “It is time and there is nothing of which to be afraid.”



“You were rather optimistic in your theory that it would only take half an hour to extract ourselves from your relatives,” Gabriella said as they rounded the side of the stables and headed down the path to the dower house. The snow was eight inches thick and still falling.

Nick flung his arm around her and pulled her into his body to help keep her warm, but she struggled free. “I think they were deliberately trying to stop us getting away. Trying to frustrate me, I’d say.”

"I do believe they were," she giggled and he chuckled in reply.

The path dipped down a slight incline and she clutched the arm of his coat. Nick held the lantern he carried higher just as his foot gave way on some unseen ice. His sore knee protested the extra pull on it. It seemed that the world overturned slowly as he landed with a thud in the soft snow. A little squeal of terror came from his wife's lips as he sucked in the air which had been brutally expelled from his lungs. A quick mental assessment of his body told him nothing had been damaged including his previous injuries.

"Oh Nick, are you all right? My darling."

"I'm fine," he assured her. "Just help me up." He raised his hand and she took it. In one swift movement he pulled her down on top of him. She squealed and kicked unconvincingly.

"Oh you vexing man," she cried as she wriggled in his grasp.

He rolled her into the snow, covering her body with his and kissed her hard and thoroughly. He would not chance her catching a chill keeping her in the snow for any length of time but he needed to claim her as his, even if only briefly.

He lifted his head and tried to look at her but their lantern had gone out. It was almost pitch black, he was hard as a brick and she was reaching up for another kiss.

"We need to hurry. I don't want you catching a chill," he said gruffly, scrambling to his knees.

"A little snow never hurt anyone," she protested.

"Come on." He got to his feet and held his hand out to her. She accepted and he pulled her to a standing position. He grabbed the now useless lantern and turned in the direction of the lights from the dower house.

"Nick?"

"Yes."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No. Why would you think that?" He pulled her against him again and this time she did not pull away.

"You were playful, then you kissed me and then you were all business-like and gruff all within about a minute. I would have kissed you back but I was taken unawares."

"I know."

"Then why did you pull away?"

"Because, my darling, if I hadn't, I was in very near danger of lifting that lovely wedding down, unfastening my knee breeches and consummating our marriage in the snow."

"Really?" Her voice was full of wonder.

"Really. And much though it may have been pleasurable while it was happening, I doubt you taking a fever tomorrow would enhance

our Christmas any.”

“I suppose not. Nick?”

“Yes.”

“When we consummate the marriage, will we be... naked?” This last word came out in a stage whisper and he suppressed a chuckle.

“I would like that very much.” He did not think he had ever had sex without any clothes on before. It had only ever been a quick tumble and the very idea of being skin-to-skin made him grow even harder, if that was possible.

“Nick?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother said a maid would prepare me for you, but I don’t need a maid.”

“That is fine. What about your gown and its fastenings and your stays?” There was a moment’s silence and he could tell she was embarrassed.

“If we are going to be naked, surely you can undo a few buttons and a few laces, can you not?”

Devil take it. The woman was trying to make his nether-regions explode with want.

“I can, if that is what you would prefer.”

“It is.”

“Will you be willing to help remove my boots?” he asked, hoping he could dismiss his valet too.

“Of course.”

“Then I shall send the servants to bed as soon as we get in the house.”

They had arrived and they stepped up onto the sweeping porch, stamping the snow off their boots. He turned and brushed the snow off Gabriella’s back and she returned the favour just as the butler opened the door.

“Ah, Speirs. Thank you,” said Nick, handing his hat and gloves to the older man. He turned to Gabby, who was shivering and having trouble with the ribbon on her fur-trimmed bonnet. He helped her out of them and her soaking kid gloves. “Right, I think we need some hot chocolate brought to her ladyship’s bedchamber, then bank the fires everywhere but that room and send all the servants to bed, including her maid and my valet.” The butler gave him a quizzical look but said nothing.

Nick helped Gabriella out of her thick fur cloak and handed it to the butler before shrugging out of his own cloak. Her gown was dry save for the hem that had been dragged through the snow.

He hurried her into the warm bedchamber. She shuddered at the change of temperature and he walked straight to her dressing room,

found a thick woollen shawl and returned, draping it round her shoulders and pressing her into a seat by the fire.

"Sorry," she whispered, wrapping the shawl tightly around herself.

"No need to apologise. I should not have pulled you into the snow."

"I shall warm up quickly enough now I am by the fire."

He turned when the maid brought in a tray laid with a large pot of hot chocolate, two cups and some sandwiches and cakes. She set it down on the small desk where Nick indicated, bobbed a curtsy and left.

Nick quickly fetched Gabriella a cup of hot chocolate before getting his own and sitting opposite her.

"Why did the butler give you a funny look when you said to bank all the fires but this one?"

"Did he?"

"You know he did."

"Well, despite the fact everyone knows that I will come to your bed and consummate the marriage, it is still the tradition that I go to my room, undress and come to you, make love then return to my own room before the maid arrives in the morning."

"So everyone pretends it's not happening? For what purpose?"

He shrugged.

"I have no idea because if there is not a stain on the sheet in the morning, you can guarantee that it would be the talk of the servants' quarters too."

"A stain?"

"Yes." He sighed. "My mother really did not tell you much, did she?"

"I did not ask much."

"Yet you have no concerns about asking me."

She smiled. "You are my husband."

"I was not your husband until twelve hours ago."

"No, but before that you were my betrothed."

"True. I like that you trust me. Do you trust me enough to show you rather than explain in detail?"

Her eyebrows raised and her shy smile was back. "First we need to get my boots off though." He raised one leg and she giggled. She placed her cup on the table at her side and moved to him, taking the boot in both hands and tugging. Not being quite as strong or as adept as a gentleman's valet, it took her a few attempts to remove the footwear. By the time the second one lay on the floor beside its twin she was gasping and laughing, her bosom heaving and her face bright, her eyes glistening.

"Come here," he said gruffly. Her grin waned and she approached

him warily, but he knew she was not afraid.

He lifted her wedding gown at the skirt until he could see her knees. It was still damp and heavy.

"Put one knee on this side of my hip and one of the other and sit on my lap." His voice was hoarse and he knew the hold he had on his self-control was tenuous at best. She did as he asked. "Now kiss me, as hard or as soft as you like. You are in control, Gabriella."

She placed a hand on either side of his face then lowered her mouth to his, moving her lips tentatively at first, waiting to see how he reacted. When he followed her lead, she became bolder, exploring his lips with her tongue then pushing it into his mouth.

Nick reached down and worked loose the laces of first one of her boots then the other as he surrendered to Gabriella's increasingly bold explorations. He pushed the boots off then set about rubbing the ice blocks that were her feet. Her toes curled and she squirmed on his lap, pulling her lips away from his.

"Sorry, I have ticklish feet," she murmured as she pressed her mouth back to his. He rubbed her feet with more vigour and she relaxed back into the kiss.

For a long time they sat in front of the fire, kissing, his hands rubbing her cold feet, her hands toying with his hair, little moans of pleasure escaping from one or the other sporadically.

For all his need to bed her and make her his own, he was happy to relax and allow this to take its own form and to allow her to lead. When she began to rock her hips against his ever-present erection, he knew it was time to move on.

He found the buttons at the back of her gown and started to undo them. When she realised what he was doing, she withdrew from the kiss and gazed into his eyes. She was hypnotising. As his fingers reached the small of her back and the last button he moved his hands back up the cotton of her chemise.

"Can I see you naked?" she asked suddenly.

He was taken aback but chuckled. "That is the general idea, my love."

"I mean before I am naked."

"If you want."

"I do."

He shrugged. "You get that wet gown off then, I'll untie your stays and while you take your hair down and braid it, I shall undress."

"Fine." She climbed off his lap and presented her back and the laces of her stays to him.

By the time he had sat on the bed and released his garters and pulled off one stocking, she was sitting at the mirror in just her chemise, pulling pins from her hair and allowing those glorious

blonde curls to fall over her shoulders.

He had never undressed so quickly in his life. In seconds he had shed every item of clothing and was crossing to stand behind her.

She was dragging a brush through her hair as if she was a mangy horse. He caught her hand and stopped her, uncurling her fingers and taking over the task.

“Nick, it’s dreadfully knotted. It needs more vigour than that.”

The moment she looked properly in the mirror and saw his naked form in it, he knew. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, and he could not help but preen.



Gabriella’s gaze took in the taut stomach muscles, the indented line of his hip, the nest of dark curls and his rod—as the countess had described it. There was no way that would fit inside her body, no matter how much the countess had said her muscles would stretch to accommodate him.

That said, the countess had also said babies came out that way and with the best will in the world, the rod was not bigger than a baby. So maybe she was right.

“What happened to trusting me?” Nick said, his voice low and encouraging. She swallowed.

“I do. I just didn’t expect it to be so big.”

“Gabby, would you leave your hair loose for me?” It was his first request of the evening. She nodded and stood, her gaze settling on his face as his settled on the tie of her chemise. She placed her hands on his shoulders, feeling the indentation of his collarbone. He raised his gaze to her face and curled his fingers into her waist-length hair. There were mere inches between them and one thin layer of cotton. She skimmed her fingers over the muscles of his chest, relishing the tightening of each muscle group as she reached it.

She smoothed the smattering of hair on his chest and around his small brown nipples. When her thumb brushed one, he sucked in a breath. She tried it again and although not close enough to feel the jerk of his manhood, she was aware it had happened.

“Nick?”

“Yes.”

“Is it strange that I want to kiss it?”

He made a kind of strangled noise as his grip in her hair tightened.

“Not at all. Feel free,” he ground out.

And so she did. She caught the tiny nubbin between her lips but it was too small so she stuck out her tongue and swirled round the raised peak. He dropped his head back and groaned. But it sounded like a good groan. She tried the other nipple, this time being a little more daring, catching it between her teeth before rubbing her tongue over the distended tip.

“Oh God, this is torture,” he whispered.

She straightened and pressed a kiss to his throat. She had enjoyed it when he had done that to her. Her hands continued to move over his hard stomach.

He brought his head forward and his hands to her face.

“It’s my turn now,” he rasped.

“But I...” She had not touched or learned anything about his stomach, or his backside, or the rod, or the balls or his strong thighs.

“You can finish your inspection later. Remember in the woods when you found the peak of pleasure?” She nodded. She had been barely able to think of much else whenever she had been alone in the past few days. “It’s time to take you there again.”

“All right.” She lifted her chemise slightly and moved closer, wrapping her arms around the neck and opening her legs, waiting for him to place his thigh between, but he shook his head.

“There is more than one route to that peak, my love.” He tugged the chemise out of her grasp and over her head. She was naked, in front of a man. He may be her husband but this was deuced uncomfortable. But when she met his gaze and the burning passion in them, the hand that wanted to cover her cheek flexed and fell back to her side.

He found her beautiful. He had said as much, though until she had seen that look in his eyes, she had not fully believed it. He marched to the bed, grabbed the covers and flung them to the bottom of the bed. He stalked back to her, lifted her in his arms, kissed her then took her over to the bed and laid her on it, her head on the soft feather pillows, her body stretched before him like a sacrifice.

His lips met hers as he climbed onto the bed, dropping half to the side of her, half atop her so as not to crush her with his weight. She curled her fingers into his hair while his tongue swept around her mouth and stroked her own tongue. She could drown in his passionate kisses if she was not careful. His hand moved onto her hip, rubbing up and down, clasp ing at her thigh then letting go. She wanted to wrap that thigh over his hip but she was afraid of looking wanton.

“Gabby, in this bed, you can touch whatever you want to touch, do whatever you want to do. If it feels right, then do it. It is the only rule to lovemaking. If you don’t like something, say so and I shall stop. But

allow your body the chance to accept the new sensation first before you call a halt. Then if you still don't like it, I shall stop. Do you understand?"

She nodded. He meant like when they were in the woods. Part of her wanted to stop because the sensations were frightening, but she had trusted him and it had been worth it.

"Nick, I trust you. I know it will hurt this first time but I am not afraid to become your wife." He nodded and placed a kiss on her cheek, then on her nose, then on her other cheek.

Before long he had kissed all over her face and was peppering kisses along her jaw and down her neck. The feeling in her core was increasing again and she desperately needed something to rock against. Suddenly his fingers were there, exploring her folds, making her groan in pleasure as his mouth descended on her erect nipple.

She grabbed hold of the pillow and arched her back, offering her breast to him, unsure what to do about the storm brewing within. He moved to the other breast as he pressed the heel of his hand to the front of her intimate place. It was as if he had found the one part of her that could give her ultimate pleasure. She writhed and he grunted in satisfaction.

She grappled at the pillow, fearful that if she touched him her nails would score his skin or that she would pull his hair out by the roots—such was the pleasure he was giving her.

"Oh Nick," she managed—not quite sure what she was asking for. He bit her nipple then soothed it with his tongue. Round and round the little nubbin, he teased and tickled as she mewled out her pleasure like a cat.

Then he lifted his head. She opened her eyes and caught his gaze as he slowly but surely pushed one finger into her opening. She tried to relax just as his lips broke into a reassuring smile. She tried to smile back. It was a strange intrusion, but she could not help clench her muscles around his digit.

"You're so tight and wet," he growled, easing the finger almost fully out before pushing it back in as far as he could reach.

"Is that... is that a good thing?" she asked in a whisper. Surely wet was never a good thing down in that part of the anatomy. His smile widened.

"Yes, my inquisitive darling. It's a very good thing."

She relaxed slightly as he used the thumb of his free hand to rub that pleasure point. He was kneeling beside her now, his rod sitting upright against his belly, fluid glistening at the tip, catching the glow from the candles and giving Gabriella the sudden urge to press her lips to it.

But his ministrations stole her thoughts. She moved her attention

back to his face and his dark gaze and the need he was drilling into her with his hands. He had been slowly working that finger and now he added a second, then he stretched out alongside her, the heel of his hand pressing against her pleasure point as he wrapped his free hand around her shoulders.

"Move if you want to, my love," he said quietly. And she did. Rocking initially, building the need up as he had done. He pressed kisses to her forehead as he continued to stoke the fire, murmuring words of encouragement. Her movement had become frantic and she knew she was close to that peak where he had taken her out in the woods.

He worked his fingers faster and pressed his hand harder against her desperate flesh. She buried her face in his neck and her fingernails into his back as the explosion erupted within her. She cried out his name while surges of pleasure seared through her very being and the world fell away leaving just Nick and her, husband and wife, lovers.

As the flames died down, she felt the slow circles his fingers were tracing on her back. He had pulled his fingers from her heat and was soothing her. She felt boneless and satisfied but there was more. She knew that and part of her feared the satisfaction would be fleeting.



At last the time had come.

Nick rolled Gabby onto her back, his manhood jerking at the sight of her kiss-swollen lips, mussed hair and passion-flushed skin. His cousin Harold had told him just to do the deed. The older man's advice had been that it would be easier for her if he was quick about it the first time. He hated to think what Harold knew about bedding virgins given that he was a confirmed bachelor.

Nick was still holding most of his weight to the side of her. He followed her fingers with his gaze as they stroked down his chest, over his stomach to rest just above the tip of his erection. She glanced up into his face and he lifted his gaze, nodding.

She ran the tip of her thumb over the slit, smearing moisture over the head and causing him to bite back a moan. In response he reached for her nipple and rubbed his thumb around the distended tip.

When Gabriella moved her hand down and circled her fingers around his rigid length, he did groan. He was going to sink into her very soon but she would be heading for the precipice again

when he did.

He kissed up to her neck to the back of her ear, then down her jaw until he captured her mouth, all the time she lightly stroked him, sending him near to insanity. He needed to be inside her. He had needed this since their first kiss outside her bedchamber.

He moved atop her, never breaking the kiss, wresting his manhood from her grip. She moved her hand onto his buttock, urging him. He kissed her deeper, pressing the tip of his erection through her folds, stopping to allow it to press against the spot that made her moan and buck her hips.

She truly was the most sensual creature he had ever had the fortune to meet. He moved his erection again and found her opening, pressing in before he had the chance to think about it.

She squeaked and tightened her grip on him. He pushed further. *Just do the deed.* When he was buried to the hilt, he pulled her closer, kissed her more intently before withdrawing. He was sure she had not breathed since his initial intrusion.

“Breathe, my love.” He pulled back his head as he pushed into her again and her wrinkled brow began to relax. A few more strokes and her eyes had darkened again. He could enjoy the feel of his wife’s hot, tight body encasing his hard length. He had surely found heaven.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his shoulders, moving in counterpoint to him, an equal in this quest in every sense. He lowered his head into the crook of her neck and succumbed to his need. He felt her body pulse around his. Good god, she had climaxed again. The thought drove him on, harder and deeper. She matched him thrust for thrust, whispering something in his ear, something about love and trust.

He had reached his limit. His self-control shattered into a million pieces as his body stiffened and expelled his seed into her warm, wet, welcoming body. His mind was incapable of thought as he mindlessly rocked, emptying himself into her... not just his seed but his heart and his soul. He’d known he was falling in love with Gabby but he had not quite realised that the task was already complete.

“Merry Christmas,” he heard her whisper as he rolled them both onto their sides and gave in to sleep of a well-satiated bridegroom.

Chapter 12

Nick rolled over in bed and reached for his bride. His eyes popped awake when all he felt were cold flat sheets. He lifted his head and looked around. He was aware of the warmth of the fire despite his bare shoulders.

It was still dark but the orange glow allowed him to look around the bedchamber to see if Gabriella was anywhere to be seen. Perhaps she had gone to visit the necessary. He groaned and placed his head back on the pillow. What a cad. He should have offered to fetch a cloth and water for her. She would have bled and there would have been the mess of his seed for her to clean up.

He moved to sit up, swinging his legs over the bed. He stopped when he saw her sitting on the large soft window seat, a warm, woollen dressing robe wrapped around her as she gazed outside.

“Gabby?”

She turned her head, a smile lighting her face. “You’re awake.”

“What time is it?”

“About six.”

He got to his feet and enjoyed the appreciative sweep of her gaze over his naked form. Need pierced through him. He grabbed a blanket from the bed and draped it over his shoulders.

“Did you call a servant to light the fire?”

“No, I lit it myself.”

“Yourself?”

She chuckled. “Thornwich has not had many servants for some time. We managed to hide the fact from you while you were there but I am used to having to set the fire in my room.”

“I see.” He turned his attention to the window. “Is it snowing?”

“Yes, it’s rather heavy again.”

“We shall not make it to the Christmas morning service in the village.”

She chuckled. “Oh my love, the vicar was well into his cups last

night when we left your parents' house and the roads will be impassable now. If he is well enough to hold a service this morning, at best it will be held in the chapel here and at worst in your parents' drawing room."

"I suppose it will." He sat opposite her and pulled his feet up onto the seat, urging her legs apart so he could wriggle his feet between them, under her knees to rest on either side of her naked hips. She did not seem to mind his familiarity and the warmth of her body heated his cooling extremities.

"Would you like to go to the breakfast at the main house? I am sure there will be a number of festivities going on all day given that none of our guests will have had the opportunity to leave due to the inclement weather."

"Oh!" Her face lit up for a moment before she frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought if I wore this you would want to couple until I was unable to walk." She opened her dressing gown to reveal a sheer red nightrail, cut so deeply and so revealing that she may as well have been wearing nothing. He whistled low as his body reacted promptly to the sight of her tightening nipples.

"Where the hell did you learn a phrase like that?" he asked, holding out his hand to her. Once she took it he urged her forward until she was kneeling across him, her thighs straddling his, her nipples at the perfect height for him to catch them in his mouth.

"Your mother said that if I wore this you would want to couple with me until I could no longer walk and if not you needed to go and see about getting eyeglasses."

He threw back his head and laughed. Who knew his mother had such a wicked sense of humour. No wonder his father had remained completely faithful to her.

"While I applaud my mother's sentiments, I would prefer not to cause you more pain than I already have. And much though I would like to couple with you until you cannot walk, I would prefer to ensure that you have a fun and happy Christmas. We shall have breakfast here then we shall go down to the manor for the service. That gives us about three hours. I do believe it would be a shame to allow this beautiful nightrail to go to waste."

Through the sheer satin material, he licked and suckled at her nipple, guided by her gasps and moans and the way she grabbed his hair and rocked against his aching erection. His hands roamed over the nightrail, then under it as he continued to lave at her fabric-covered peaks. He could never tire of her. She was like clay in his hands, being moulded and turning into something even more beautiful with every movement of his flesh against hers. And he loved how she

responded to him—that she had no modesty when it came to finding her own pleasure.

When he could stand her rubbing her sex against his hardened flesh no longer, he grasped her around the hips and lifted her. Moving one hand to her arse to keep her in position, he slid his fingers through her folds to find them slick and ready for him.

“Let me find you a more comfortable seat, my love.” He grinned, positioning himself at her opening. She raised an eyebrow but she was not an idiot. She knew what he was doing and what he wanted. “Go down slowly so you don’t hurt either of us,” he encouraged in a low, soft tone. As she sank onto his shaft he watched the myriad of expressions cross her face—concern, need, worry, enjoyment, interest, lust. He moved his hand away as she continued to sheath him. He bit back a moan, intent on watching her face.

“Oh Nick,” she whispered.

Surprise lit her features when at last he felt her fully seat herself atop him.

He chuckled, making her clench her muscles around him, turning his laugh into a groan.

“You didn’t think you could take all of me, did you?”

She shook her head, her recently braided hair moving slightly. He pushed an escaping curl behind her ear.

“Kiss me and then I shall relinquish all control to you. Go as fast or as slow as you like.”

And she did. After a long, slow, toe-curling kiss which had Nick reaching to the depth of his soul for self-control to stop him gathering her in his arms, stalking to the bed and rutting into her until he was sated, she started to move, angling herself, twisting and rubbing until she found just the right stroke to give her the ultimate pleasure. He watched in wonder, toying with her nipples, kneading her breasts and arse and occasionally skimming his thumb between them to press on that part of her that made her suck in a breath and give a little shudder of pleasure.

She rode him expertly, and though she was finding her own pleasure, she was ramping up his in small increments. As someone who had been single for a long time and had no great fondness for bawdy houses, he’d spend many nights slaking his lust into his own hand or tamping it down entirely.

At last she threw her arms around his neck, riding him slowly and intently. She was close, he could feel it in the tension in her muscles. She whimpered and he began to slowly match her movements, his own need beginning to take on a life of its own.

“Oh Nick, I can’t...” She wailed quietly. He caught hold of her hips and pumped hard upwards into her. His body took over, the

uncomfortable position be damned. His renewed participation seemed to spur her back to life and she rocked against him. He couldn't wait for her. He could see to her pleasure afterwards if necessary. He pressed his fingers between them, hard, tearing a howl of need from her. His balls tightened one more time, his muscles became like steel and he shot his seed deep inside her in one final upward thrust.

He was rigid. Perched between the window seat and the wall, his fingers digging into his wife's hips, just as Gabriella's fingers dug into his. As his body relaxed he was aware of her internal walls throbbing around his erection.

He huffed out his breath and sank back onto the cushion of the window seat, gathering her into his arms, appreciating the soft fluttering of her internal muscles around his slowly deflating member.

He wondered if it was he who would be unable to walk by the time they made it to the manor house.

"Nick?"

"Yes."

"I know it is not very fashionable, especially when one's husband only married one as a result of a wager—" he stilled, dread filling his heart "—but I think I may have fallen in love with you. Is that terribly silly?"

He relaxed, running his hand over her soft bare arse which was sticking up at a very cute angle since her knees were still tucked under her.

"No, my love. That's not silly at all. Despite the fact I only married you to win a wager and because your brother can be a complete idiot, I do believe I have fallen in love with you."

"Nick?"

"Yes, my love."

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Gabby."

Epilogue

Twenty-Fifth December 1819

Gabriella bounced John, Viscount Marsden, her nephew on her knee and looked over to the window. A smile touched her lips as she noticed her brother's hand very briefly curl around Edna's fingers before coming back to rest at his side. She could not quite believe the change that had come over her errant brother since the previous Christmas.

"Ah ah," cried the infant on her knee as he began to struggle. Edna turned around and came hurrying over as Gabriella readjusted the child.

"I am sorry, Gabriella. I think it is time for his nap."

"Oh, he is fine, Edna," said Gabriella, a little disappointed that her time with her gorgeous nephew would be so short. Edna chuckled.

"Oh, Gabby, he's tired. I promise you can come up to the nursery and see him after his nap." Slightly mollified, Gabriella relinquished her charge and muttered an apology.

"No need to apologise. We all feel the same way in the first couple of months when we are increasing."

Gabriella felt her heart leap into her throat.

"I...I...."

Edna chuckled.

"I take it you have not told Eastden yet."

"No. I was waiting until tonight. I thought it would be a nice present."

"In that case, my lips are sealed."

"Is it so obvious?"

"Only to me."

"And to Joseph."

"Oh good God, Gabby, you could be waltzing naked with the Duke

of Wellington round the drawing room and Joseph would not notice except to ask if I thought your companion might like a brandy and a game of cards... for pennies, of course."

Gabriella chuckled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Come on, John, time for bed." With that, the Countess of Thornwich left the room under the watchful and rather lusty gaze of her husband.

Gabriella wandered through the hallway until she came across the earl's study. There perched on the desk was Nick, a frown on his face.

"Nick?"

"Yes?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you. Close and lock the door."

She did as he asked then raised an eyebrow at him.

"What took you so long?"

"I did not know we had an appointment."

"I thought you would follow."

"Sorry, I didn't know you wanted me to follow. I was playing with John."

"I saw. I could not watch any longer."

"Why?"

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed.

"Every time your courses come you seem distant and I feel you withdraw."

"Well, it would be rather messy to couple when I have my courses."

"But I know you are disappointed and it breaks my heart. And then I see you with John. Your eyes were filled with tears when you were bouncing him on your knee and I..." He let out a roar of frustration. It looked as if Nick was going to have to get his Christmas gift a few hours early.

"Nick?"

"Yes."

"When did I last have my course?"

"I don't know."

"It was before we went to London. When did we go to London?"

"Mid-October."

"That is correct." She waited for him to connect the facts in his head.

"So you have missed your courses twice?" he asked.

She nodded.

"You are increasing?"

She nodded again.

"I am to become a father." Her lips split into a grin.

“You are.”

“Oh, Gabby.” He lifted her up into his arms and swung her round, pressing kisses to her before letting her down, cupping her cheeks and peppering kisses all over her face. “You...wonderful...clever...fantastic...perfect...beautiful...adorable...woman. I love you beyond measure.”

She giggled. “I will take it that you are happy at the news.”

“Deliriously so. Thank you.”

“Merry Christmas, my love.”

“Merry Christmas.”

His mouth descended on hers as he inched her skirts up. It was time for Gabby to receive her gift.